AHEADシリーズ

終わりのクロニクル 5【上】

著●川上 稔
イラスト●さとやす(TENKY)

電撃文庫

終わりのクロニクル

著●川上 稔　イラスト●さとやす（TENKY）

5
【上】

—Everyone,
Are you
Waiting there?

The Ending Chronicle

Act.05

CHARACTER

02

04

Celestial Mountain

Empty Space

Eight-Layered World

They perfected a technique of applying concepts to non-divine human bodies and used concepts for evolution and for human pleasures while avoiding the annoying responsibilities of being a god.

Name: Baku

As a result, 7th-Gear decided they had arrived at the farthest reaches of mankind, so they wished to be destroyed at their peak and they searched for someone to inherit all they had accomplished.

About 7th-Gear

7th-Gear was a layered world filled with many ups and downs. The very top of its eight layers contained a giant mountain and river.
It contained the optimum environment for human life and the people who lived there desired to create the ultimate culture and civilization using the human mind and body.

Name: Brunhild·Schild

HEALING BATH GREEN

THIS WEEK IS THE POPULAR

BEAST BATH

*Picture is from the Colosseum Twelve Temples Bath.

EFFECTS - BENEFITS - COMPULSORY ADDITIONS

1: EVEN THE MOST EXTREME EXHAUSTION WILL BE FORCIBLY EXTRACTED. REST UNTIL YOU DIE.
2: A FLAVORFUL AROMA OF RELAXING MATCHA.
3: PLANT CREATURE SHOWS ON EVERY ODD HOUR. QUITE AN ODD EVENT, ISN'T IT?
(THAT ONE DESERVES CRUCIFIXION)
4: YOU MAY TAKE A PLANT CREATURE HOME WITH YOU IF THE CREATURE ITSELF AGREES.

CONTENTS

終わりのクロニクル 5上
プロット表

序章 『終わりの始まり』 11
第一章 『いつもの君の』 27
第二章 『不明の始まり』 47
第三章 『一人の抗い』 77
第四章 『客人の夜』 99
第五章 『別れの感覚』 129
第六章 『憶りの始まり』 153
第七章 『勝利の逆意』 173
第八章 『困りの訪問』 207
第九章 『見届けの後ろ姿』 233
第十章 『来訪の音』 249
第十一章『人意の流れ』 283
第十二章『結論のための』 299
第十三章『世界の表情』 327
第十四章『立ち上がりの感想』 355
第十五章『声のあるところ』 397
第十六章『乾きの望み』 427
第十七章『同意の理由』 453
第十八章『私の大事なもの』 471
第十九章『消滅の裏切り』 493
ボク達が見失わぬように

イラスト：さとやす（TENKY）
カバーデザイン：渡辺宏一（2725inc）
本文デザイン：TENKY

05

・現状における佐山中心人物相関図・

家族関係

- 田宮家 — 実家代わり
- 佐山・浅犠 — 佐山の亡父
- 佐山・諭命 — 佐山の亡母

元護国課

- 佐山・薫 — 養父
- ジークフリート — 図書館司書
- 新庄・要 — 新庄の肉親?
- アブラム — 実働部部長
- 趙・晴 — 若作り
- 大城・宏昌 — 技術者
- サンダーソン — 機竜乗り
- 飛場・竜徹 — 道場主

?

- 新庄・由起緒 — 新庄の母?

佐山・御言

新庄・運／切 — 不断の存在

生徒会関係

- 大樹先生 — 担当・顧問

出雲・覚 — 会長

風見・千里 — 会計

ダン・原川 — ニヒラー少年

飛場・竜司 — ややエロ

UCAT関係

- 大城・至 — 監督
- Sf — 至の侍女
- シビュレ — 整備役
- ボルドマン — 連携役
- 大城・一夫 — 困った老人

1st-G

- ブレンヒルト — 美術部部長
- ディアナ — 独逸UCAT

2nd-G

- 鹿島・昭緒 — 2nd-Gの軍神
- 月読・史弦 — 開発部部長

ヒオ・T — おろおろ娘

美影 — 自動人形?

Prologue

“Beginning of the End”

That is something
That swoops down
In the very places that refuse to accept it

●

There was a sound.

It was a low electronic tone sounding four times to indicate the hour.

But that sound was not the only one permeating the air.

Another higher-pitched sound continued without end: a set of footsteps.

Those footsteps travelled down a white corridor. The windows of that corridor showed the early morning from four stories aboveground.

A woman was walking down the corridor. She had red hair, a slender body, and a maid uniform. Her right hand held a box of food.

She and the footsteps both stopped in front of a certain room.

The white door contained a placard with the handwritten words “The Holy and Incredible Ooshiro Kazuo’s Room”.

When she saw the placard, the woman tilted her head and lowered the box to the floor.

“I have determined this requires correction.”

She pulled a magic marker from her chest and rewrote a portion so it now said “The Wholly Incorrigible Ooshiro Kazuo’s Room”. She replaced the rewritten placard and then straightened it.

“Well done. I have determined that was an excellent job.”

She pressed the button next to the door to open the door.

“?”

But it did not open.

She tilted her head in confusion and turned to look at the button.

She noticed a piece of paper stuck next to it which contained a cartoonish drawing of Ooshiro giving a thumbs up.

“Make a weird noise and the door will open!” the drawing said.

#8 corrected her posture and tried to decide what to do, but the concept of “weird noises” did not exist within an automaton. Any noise an automaton made had the approval of their accurate decisions.

No automaton’s decisions would approve of something “weird”.

While trying to figure out what to do, she realized she had forgotten something.

As was the custom near the end of the month, the rooms were to

be cleaned today and some preliminary preparations were needed for that.

That was why she faced the closed door and spoke through her shared memory.

“#23, spray insecticide into the room in front of me.”

“Tes.”

While determining that she was satisfied with how #23 responded without question, she picked up the box from the floor with her right hand.

A moment later, she heard something from beyond the white door.

“Nwopei!!”

The automatic door opened and a transparent gas entered the corridor like shimmering heat.

Beyond the door, #8 saw a large white room.

Below the fluorescent lights on the ceiling, Ooshiro was dancing within the shimmering gas.

…I have determined this is perfectly normal.

She passed by the intensely dancing old man in a lab coat who was holding his throat.

“Ooshiro-sama, I have brought your dinner.”

She visually confirmed the contents of his large desk. It was normally filled with toys, but today it actually had a space cleared in the center. He had likely been doing some kind of work.

…But what?

She remembered that a lot had happened in the month since the battle with 5th-Gear.

He was likely trying to put everything in order after that.

She then thought about the people involved in that incident.

The 5th-Gear Concept Core half held by Black Sun had been taken into Thunder Fellow’s Vesper Cannon. Heo had become a temporary inspector and her guardian Odor was living in Yokota UCAT along with Roger.

Violet had been destroyed at the Kanda Laboratory, but she was apparently having a new body made. Her body had been a poor match in the first place, but the idiosyncrasies that had given her actions had led to her skill in combat. A standard 3rd spare body could not recreate those idiosyncrasies, so the automatons she had

protected were helping create a new body for her below Kanda.

…I have determined she is a fortunate unit.

#8 had been able to see Gyes again during that incident, but the other automaton had returned to Izumo UCAT that morning. #8 had yet to meet Miyako, Gyes's master, so she wondered what kind of person she was.

Team Leviathan was preparing for the next negotiation. The older members like Kazami and Izumo were occasionally training with the newer members like Hiba and Heo and it seemed they were improving.

As for Sayama and Shinjou…

…They say they will be leaving for their respective destinations tomorrow.

Sayama was going to the mountains of Okutama to follow in the footsteps of Professor Kinugasa and his own father who had also pursued the professor. His destination was the home Professor Kinugasa had supposedly left behind.

Sayama had a photograph of the building from a newsletter he had brought back from Izumo UCAT. #8 had been the one to calculate out the general location of the building based on the background in the photograph and GPS data.

After thanking her, Sayama had asked if there was anything he could help her with, but she had no personal hopes of that sort. If he had asked if there was anything she wanted him to do, that would have been a different matter.

However, a maid automaton did not ask for that kind of thing herself.

"…"

Shinjou on the other hand was visiting Sakai in order to pursue the woman named Shinjou Yukio.

Chances were good she was not Shinjou's relative and this was not a Team Leviathan job.

That was why she wanted to do this before the next Leviathan Road began.

…But the Army is preparing to make their move.

The attacks by the Army had grown sporadic.

Recently, activity had ended in the distribution routes for their overseas sources of money.

This meant the Army was going to make a major move before long.

Thinking about the state of the Leviathan Road, UCAT had already gathered the Concept Cores for 1-6 and 8-10.

The only one requiring new negotiations was 7th, so a lot thought this would be when the Army attacked. Quite a few requests had come in for transfers from the standard division to the field operations division and from the field operations division to the special division.

But even though a lot was in motion…

…I did not think UCAT Director Ooshiro had much work for today.

Wondering what he could be doing, #8 looked to the side.

"…"

Ooshiro's dance was approaching its climax.

"Ooshiro-sama, how long do you intend to continue dancing?" she asked with a frown. "Do you not want your dinner?"

"Ah, w-wait, #8! D-d-d-d- you have any idea what is happening to me!?"

She looked at him, placed the box on the desk, opened it, and produced a container.

"You appear to be dancing."

"Nwah, you're just the worst! L-listen. I-I c-can't br-brea-…peh peh peh peh."

"Ooshiro-sama, you need not try so hard to speak. I know what you are saying."

"R-really!? Then you know what I just said?"

"Nwah, you're just the worst! L-listen. I-I c-can't br-brea-…peh peh peh peh."

"Not what I literally said! What I have a feeling you don't understand is what I meant!!"

He held his throat and rapidly jumped up and down.

From that, she estimated what it was he wanted to say.

…I see.

"Testament. I have determined you are dancing for joy because you are having difficulty breathing."

"Why do you insist on defying me at every turn!?"

"Ooshiro-sama, please calm down. …Your logic is falling apart. I

have determined this is entirely unrelated to whether I am being defiant or not. Let us simplify the problem before continuing: what seems to be the problem?"

"The person right in front of me!!!"

She contemplated his pointing finger. While it was possible he could be referring to her, that was unlikely as he had said "person" and not "automaton".

Based on that conclusion, she turned around to find the person who must be behind her.

She found a window with its shutter closed, but she saw their reflection in the glass.

She took a step back and Ooshiro was now pointing at his own reflection in the window.

She tilted her head.

"But I already knew that. I am a little disappointed."

Ooshiro collapsed to the floor and #8 took a step back from his sprawled-out form.

After all, he had taken upskirt photographs of her in the past. He had claimed his shoe was untied, but he had been wearing sandals. Based on the manual Diana had given her, #8 had successfully used the ends of her arms to apply pressure to his sides and transport him about three meters diagonally upwards.

...But ever since then...

"Why was I put in charge of you, Ooshiro-sama?"

"D-do you not like it?"

She replied to the voice from the floor while cleaning off the desk. She dumped the plastic models, dolls, and manga in the trash can.

"I have not determined that. Your room has a high tendency toward entropy and always having a job is a happy thing for a maid automaton. Also, the manual I was given said my primary job is to transport you into the air using various parts of my body. This gives me plenty of opportunities to fulfill that job, so I would call this an excellent workplace. However..."

She continued while bending all of the DVDs piled up on the desk and using them to neatly fill the trash can with no gaps.

"The exact same events repeat too often, so I have recently been unable to stimulate my memory device. I have determined it is a poor environment for an automaton to grow."

"I-I'm being plenty stimulated right now. Especially as a living creature! S-see? I'm growing faint and I think I have a delightful urge to vomit!"

"Testament. I have determined you are hungry. I had some odd jobs to complete, so I completely forgot about you as your priority level is set extremely low. Your dinner is about eight hours late, so I brought you a large serving of the cafeteria's new ramen rice. Please eat."

"Ramen rice? They have that? So it's a new dish?"

"Testament. Hot ramen noodles are placed on top of a plate of steaming rice. I chose the flat noodles as they seemed to have the most volume."

"All those carbohydrates are going to make me fat!!"

#8 glared down at the old man who was rolling around on the floor.

"Why are you so selfish?"

"I have a feeling you aren't even listening to me, #8-kun!"

"I have determined you are imagining things. My auditory devices are functioning perfectly as always," she said. "Also, I forgot to mention it, but in preparation for today's cleaning, I had insecticide sprayed in your room. If you have difficulty breathing, I have determined you should leave the room."

"Th-that is why I've been suffering all this time!"

She looked back down at him when he said that.

"Why would you dance instead of telling me something so important?"

"#-#8-kun? I just realized what we lack is communication!"

"A maid automaton does not desire casual communication with her master."

"H-how can you say that when you casually scorn me all the time!!"

"Casually? Even if I have ever scorned you, it would have been after careful thought."

"How much thought?"

"3rd's artificial intelligence is perfect, so approximately a split-second of thought."

"That's the same thing! That's the same thing as doing it without thinking!"

She determined he was the sort of person who would never understand even if she stated it plainly.

Deciding to simply leave his food on the desk, she removed the wrap from the ramen rice and set down the containers for the arbitrary toppings she had brought for him: marmalade, chocolate chips, and mint.

Upon closing the box, she suddenly realized what Ooshiro had been working on today.

“Ooshiro-sama, what are these documents on the corner of your desk?”

“Riiiice! Riiiice! That lovely silver sushi riiiiice!!”

#8 followed Entry 11 Part 3 of the manual and pressed the end of her leg against his side for just an instant to make him hang in midair for approximately two seconds. Her job was to transport him to the air. What happened afterwards was none of her business.

He slammed into the wall, bounced off, and stood up.

“O-ow!! #-#8-kun! I think kicking me is a bit-…”

“Ooshiro-sama, that is irrelevant, so please answer my question. I apologize, but it is a question about one of your few actual jobs. When I checked your desk, I noticed-…”

“Oh, you mean the new figure I bought? That’s Full Transformation Magical Girl Gomes Trigger!”

#8 broke Gomes Trigger into four pieces and dropped them into the trash can.

“Ahhhh!!”

The door opened and then closed at that weird cry, but she did not care. Without a thought to how nosy she was being, she gathered the documents from the corner of the desk.

She commented on the first five documents.

“Why are these letters of resignation addressed to you? Is someone planning to leave during this busy and dangerous time when the Army could attack at any moment?”

Ooshiro did not react. After his previous shout, he had inhaled and crossed his arms and he was now staring at her in that pose.

He was showing his teeth in a smile and #8 made a certain judgment about that expression.

…Is he testing me?

Meanwhile, she reached for something else on the desk.

It was a schedule for Team Leviathan's actions and it was written by Sayama, but the actual schedule was summed up in a single sentence.

"What is this? It makes no sense. Don't tell me Sayama-sama plans to…"

Just as she prepared to say aloud what Team Leviathan was scheduled to do, she realized something.

Ooshiro had passed out while still standing and smiling.

…Did the insecticide get to him?

If he died, she would be the one to discover his body. She would be thoroughly questioned, but she wanted to avoid that since she was so busy. That was why she grabbed his collar and dragged him over to the automatic door.

However, it would not open. A weird noise was necessary.

Oh, no, she thought just before grabbing and twisting the ear of what she held in her hand.

That produced a weird noise and the door opened.

She finally dragged him out into the white corridor. While making her way to the medical room, she thought to herself.

…Is Sayama-sama scheduled to stop by today?

He was not. Both he and Shinjou would not be visiting UCAT because they had to prepare for their trips on the following day.

"…"

Kashima would be visiting their school that night to give a lecture on how the Gears had been formed. After that, Hiba, Mikage, Heo, and Harakawa had their training and examinations.

"But by then, that item on the schedule will have already taken effect."

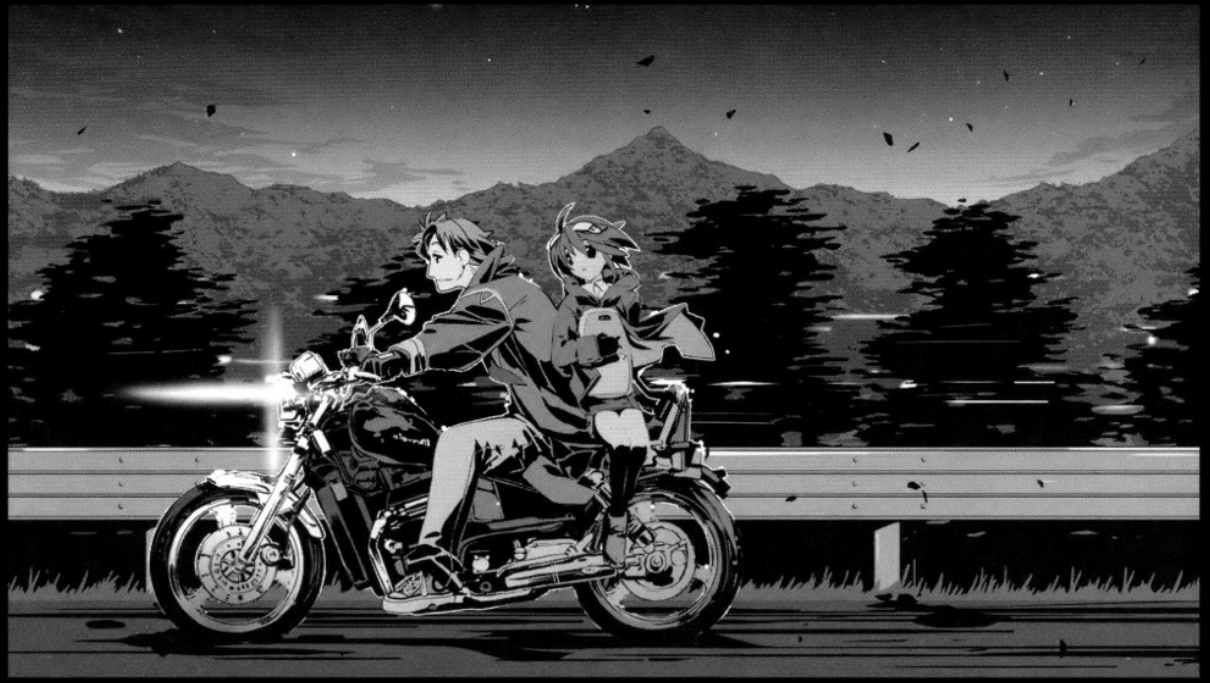
She guessed that it had been Sayama's request to keep this a secret. But…

"What is going to become of Team Leviathan and the Leviathan Road?"

And…

"I simply cannot understand what you are thinking, Sayama-sama."

Her gaze turned to the dark night beyond the corridor window.



終わりのクロニクル

I want to be with you
And so...

—He who does not accept that is alone

Chapter 1

“Your Usual Self”

Have I grown lazy?
Am I a pleasant person?

●

As evening approached, the colors of the sky faded but did not yet turn scarlet.

In this vague time of day, the air contained a slight chill and a single sound could be heard travelling below the sun setting in the west.

It was a motorcycle engine.

The large black motorcycle drove north in the left lane of a road with a long wall to the east.

Riding it were a large boy with a brown coat and a girl with a beige half coat.

The name Izumo was sewn inside the collar of the boy's coat as it waved in the wind and the girl's coat similarly said Kazami.

Kazami held a white convenience store bag in her left hand and her right hand held Izumo's shoulder.

"Kaku, a lot of the leaves have fallen here too."

The trees lining the road all had their branches exposed and the fallen yellow leaves flew up like a wave as the motorcycle passed by.

Kazami was focused more on the trees than the walking people.

"Will nothing but the evening dew cover them before long?"

"Don't get so realistic, Chisato. More importantly, were you able to buy it at the convenience store?"

"Yes, they had the usual coffee, 'Blue Mountain – Human Mountain Range'."

"You can be really picky."

"You're the one that told me about it."

"My interest in coffee came from my mom, so I'm technically just the messenger."

That silenced her for a moment, but she finally spoke.

"Sorry."

"Don't say that," he replied while speeding up.

The racing motorcycle turned the early evening air into a chilly wind.

Kazami glanced at her watch and saw it was 4:00 PM.

…Has everyone started going all-out with the afterschool festival preparations yet?

They only had about a week to go and Kazami was planning to perform in a band, but something else was more important.

"The next Leviathan Road should be coming up soon, right? We need to keep up our training. With Harakawa and Heo, we actually have some air support, so we can do things differently now."

"But how long will that last?"

"Eh?"

Through the wind, she heard his back reply to her confusion.

"The negotiations are complete for the Concept Cores of 1st-6th and 10th. UCAT already has 8th and 9th, so 7th is really the only one left."

She understood what he meant, so she shrugged a little.

"Yes, this Leviathan Road should mostly finish it. …I guess there won't be any more large-scale battles."

"Is there at least a small part of you that thinks that's a shame?"

"Eh? No, I, um, I'm a normal person, so of course I wouldn't-…"

"There's a part of me that thinks that."

"That was mean," she muttered before carefully choosing her words. "I suppose…I do think it's a bit of a shame. I'm proud and happy to have such powerful comrades. And we put so much effort into gaining this power and into fighting."

While saying that, some nostalgic memories came to mind: when she had quit her sports team for a certain reason and when she had trembled upon entering her first battle.

It had been over half a year since the werewolf she had shot to save Sayama and Shinjou had chosen his own death.

She had worried about a lot, but she felt it had been her duty as an upperclassman not to let it show.

She wondered if the new additions who had made things so much more fun were her reward for that.

That was why she asked him "Right?" and felt them speed up while he nodded back.

"A lot really has happened. …But there's another problem, Chisato. There's still the Army."

"Oh, right. Will they really show up, though? Well, it is true they seem to appear around Shinjou a lot."

"But she refused them when they asked which side she was on, right? …So they'll show up. After all, the Leviathan Road is

essentially over once we get 7th's Concept Core. But if they stop us now, they can both keep us from completing the Leviathan Road and steal all the Concept Cores besides 7th's. If it was me, I would make an all-out attack during the Leviathan Road with 7th-Gear."

"You're right," she muttered while leaning against him and letting him feel her nod.

…The time to settle this is coming.

She did not know what the Army's goal was, but it seemed they knew some kind of truth and were opposing UCAT based on that truth.

And based on what she had heard from Shinjou about the girl named Mikoku and the information Ooshiro and the others had let slip…

"The Army was created shortly after UCAT's blank period. Just like the current UCAT."

"Do you think there's a connection between UCAT and the Army?"

She had trouble choosing her words, but she still answered.

She used her cheek to send a nod of confirmation into his back and he continued after a pause.

"I think so too. And I think they have more information than we do. Part of me wonders what we should do if it turns out righteousness is on their side."

"I-I seriously doubt that."

"Why?"

"Because Low-Gear is acting as the villain and completing the Leviathan Road by accepting the evil we did to the other Gears. That means we're already facing the righteousness of each Gear. What other righteousness could there be?"

Her answer was meant to eliminate her unease over that unlikely possibility and Izumo's reply came in his usual carefree tone.

"You're right about that. The Army's supposed to be made up of remnants from the other Gears. If that's true, their righteousness can't be any greater than what we created in our negotiations with the Gears."

"See?" she said while noting that only applied if they finished facing the righteousness of all the Gears. "If there is righteousness beyond that, it would have to be something that precedes the

righteousness of the Leviathan Road or the other Gears. It would have to be a kind of righteousness that says the very act of negotiation is evil. And the only example of that I can think of would be the righteousness of terrorists who refuse to compromise."

…What else could it be?

As she tilted her head, Izumo's words reached her.

"You might be right," he began. "But either way, the Army is probably prepared to fight. They're a smaller organization than UCAT, but they're specialized toward crushing us. Gyes said they have almost nothing to use as bargaining chips, but that means this won't come down to negotiation."

"This is starting to smell bloody."

Kazami tried to grasp this unseen enemy.

"But even if the Army proclaims their own righteousness, they have nothing to negotiate with afterwards. Their righteousness is nothing more than the reason why they want to defeat us; it doesn't justify anything. In that case, let them come for a fight. We've grown plenty strong as well."

"I-I thought my future wife was only violent, but she's started having dangerous thoughts, too."

"Shut up," she said while sending a light punch into his back.

She then smiled bitterly and warmth filled the wind.

The motorcycle was slowing as they approached the entrance to Taka-Akita Academy.

"But," she said as inertia gently pressed her against his back. "We should probably be on our guard. I feel bad doing that to Sayama and Shinjou, though."

"Doing what to them? Oh, because they're heading out tonight?"

Sayama was going to Okutama to search for Professor Kinugasa's house.

Shinjou was going to Sakai to pursue Shinjou Yukio.

"As their comrade, I think they should show some self-restraint. I feel bad, but I think we should stop them from leaving and instead go ahead with 7th-Gear's Leviathan Road. It would be safer if we stayed together instead of splitting up."

Izumo said nothing and that silence urged her to continue.

"Manager Kashima is visiting the school tonight, right? It'll be pretty late, but he wants to use the Kinugasa Library to give us a

lecture on the formation of the eleven Gears. I'll tell Sayama and Shinjou then. I'll probably have to bow down to them, but looking at the big picture, I think that's for the best."

"Hold on. If you start rationalizing why you're going to bow down to someone, it'll turn into a habit."

Izumo sounded fed up with this, but Kazami smiled bitterly.

"I'm just going to ask them to keep things like normal. Normal is best in busy and dangerous times like this. When we're all together like normal, we're unbeatable, right?"

The wind twisted and the scenery rotated to the right.

She could not see directly ahead due to his back, but the trees on either side changed and they entered the school grounds.

She heard hammering, shouting, and grinding in the distance.

This was their usual school and their usual everyday life.

Scarlet began to fill the light behind them and she saw the color dye his back.

The evening sun slowly began to sink below the horizon.

●

A certain color spread through the bottom of the night.

That color was a light. It was a red light. Specifically, the red light of flames.

A fire as large as an ocean flickered as it ruled a large portion of land.

And that fire flowed. Even if a building stood in its way, the fire would flow like a river along that rectangular path, cover it, and envelop everything.

The city burned like kindling.

The sound of overheated burning passed between the buildings again and again. The scorching wind was blasted into the blazing sky and released.

But that was not all.

All of the city's structures had cracks running through them. The larger ones looked like similarly sized blades had cut through them and the smaller looked like they had threads running through them.

The city's elevated highway and the high-rise buildings were slowly but surely collapsing.

The electronic sign on a certain building was still active.

It gave the date and time as 12-25-1995 4:32 and the temperature as 68 degrees.

From the center of the breaking and burning city, a certain structure was visible to the north.

It was a castle.

The castle's main tower had an aqua-colored tile roof.

It was Osaka Castle.

Even that giant castle surrounded by white walls had not escaped its destructive fate.

The castle's collapse began with cracks in the lower wall. With the sound of splitting rock, horizontal cracks ran through the wall and the area above and below the cracks tilted and collapsed either outward or inward.

The giant castle collapsed like a bellows being pressed together. Once that process reached a certain point, the weight of the upper structure caused a landslide to the west.

The entire castle toppled over as if sliding down.

The top of the main tower remained relatively intact, but it was torn apart as it slid atop the avalanche of the collapsing castle.

By that point, most of the buildings in the city had been reduced to rubble.

The elevated structures, the high-rise buildings, the streetlights, the street signs, and everything else that supported the city were gone.

All that remained was the wind, heat, and the dark sky that looked down upon it all.

"———————"

Someone could be seen there.

They were running through the deserted and destroyed city as if rushing into it.

That person was not alone and not all of the people there were running.

There were countless people and they travelled both along the surface and through the sky.

This power that managed great numbers was known as a military force and their advance was swift.

Some wore white and black armored uniforms, some wore black and white ones, some wore blue and white ones, and others wore a

few other color combinations. They would leap across several dozen meter areas of destroyed ground as they ran and similarly colored forms flew above.

In the lead was a young man wearing a white and black armored uniform. His features could be described as sharp and he was accompanied by a woman in an identically colored armored uniform.

The short-haired woman said something to him with a pale look on her face.

“——————”

Her words formed a question, but the young man did not verbally reply.

He simply shook his head.

A voice came from overhead and he looked up toward it. Far above, a woman in a black armored uniform rode a broom.

Similarly, mechanical dragons flew into the sky in a dispersed formation. They were moving to intercept something coming from up ahead.

Then, a man ran up from behind the young man and woman.

Instead of an armored uniform, he wore vest modified into a mountain climbing jumpsuit.

His waist-length hair fluttered in the wind and he drew the long sword on his back as he ran.

As he did, he gave a parting remark about moving on ahead.

However, the others could not hear what he had said.

Nevertheless, the sharp-featured young man replied with a silent look.

That was all, but it was then that the young man faced straight forward.

He turned his harsh gaze forward to look at the crumbling city and at the sky. He then took a breath and spoke.

He spoke the words that would bring an end to this feast of destruction.

His voice called in something active to take the place of the passive collapse.

“Go ahead!!” he shouted.

●

Shinjou woke.

She did so because something suddenly grabbed her butt.

A tight grip latched onto both the left and right side.

Despite the unexpected situation, no question filled her mind. The very action itself had already led her to the answer.

“S-Sayama-kun!? What are you doing!?”

She shot up from her face-down position and cried out, but that was when she truly woke up.

…Huh?

Her brain and body could not keep up with her waking.

While sitting on all fours with the blanket over her like a turtle, she looked at the head of the bed before her and then at her surroundings.

The clock said it was six in the evening, the room was dimly-lit, and only a bit of light came in through the window.

“Um…”

She spent seven seconds unable to remember why she had woken or why she had been asleep at this time. Once blood reached her brain, she understood what she was seeing, but it took another dozen or so seconds for her memories to return.

Her recovered memories chose the question with more temporal locality: why she had woken.

…Um, I think it was because something grabbed my butt.

Indeed something had. And still was.

Wondering what was going on, she looked behind her and found the blanket over her back. For some reason, that blanket was supported even further back than her own body.

It seemed there was something behind her.

“That’s you, isn’t it, Sayama-kun?”

“Ha ha ha. What are you talking about? I am only a modest butt spirit. Your butt was simply so wonderful that-…”

She kicked the spirit and it descended to the floor, blanket and all.

…I see. Now I know why I woke up.

And now that she had knocked the blanket to the floor…

“It’s cold in here.”

November was arriving soon and the room was nearly dark at only six.

However, she could hear a number of intermittent sounds

outside.

They were the same sounds she had heard during May. She heard nails being hammered and transport carts rolling down the pathways.

…They're preparing for the school festival.

That's right, she thought. *The day the festival preparations begin is…*

"The day I leave for Sakai."

A black binder and a night train ticket sat at the head of her bed.

That was why she had been asleep at this time. She was taking a sleeper train to Sakai late this night. The train left Tokyo at eleven, so she had wanted to take a nap ahead of time.

It had been before the athletic festival in October that she had decided to visit Sakai.

She wanted to pursue the woman named Shinjou Yukio who was the grandchild of Shinjou Kaname, a member of the National Defense Department.

She felt the woman was a stranger. The age fit for being her parent, but she was female. If she had gotten married, she would have taken on her husband's surname.

But she had a reason to pursue her despite that: the hymn titled Silent Night.

…She most likely knew the song that was my only memory.

They had a few points in common: the surname, their lack of parents, and that song.

That was enough to give her a curious desire to pursue the woman.

And as far as her schedule was concerned, she would soon become much busier with the student council and UCAT.

That made this her only chance.

All she knew was that Shinjou Yukio had been taken in by an orphanage church in Sakai after she had lost her parents.

Shinjou had done some searching online and had found a few different churches, but all she had learned was that none of them had existed during the sixties when Shinjou Yukio had been born.

Most of the earthquake volunteer websites were no longer functioning. She had emailed and called the places with reduced operations, but had not learned much of anything.

She could not think of any other way to draw information to her while remaining in Tokyo, so she would travel to Sakai and visit the city's municipal office and the local volunteer office. That would likely be the quickest method.

In truth, she felt it would be easier to ask Sayama, Ooshiro, or the others for help.

…But this is my problem. Also…

"Sayama-kun said he was going to search for Professor Kinugasa's house in Okutama."

He would be entering the mountains at night. She thought that was irrational, but he was an irrational person. She doubted he would be able to restrain himself and she was almost certain stopping him would make him even more likely to go.

And then…

"Are you simply going to ignore me, Shinjou-kun?"

The floor spirit spoke to her, so she ignored it. She was fairly certain a 1st-Gear teaching said listening to the voices of evil spirits would allow them to drag you into space-time.

…Well, that doesn't matter. But…

"Huh?"

She felt like something important had happened just before the spirit had grabbed her butt.

…I had a dream before that woke me in surprise.

The word "dream" triggered her memories.

The dream had been of the city of Osaka burning.

It was obvious why she had had that dream. Baku was here and Sayama was with her too.

When she realized that dream was something that had actually happened, she shuddered and took in a breath.

She then remembered the people who had run through the center of crumbling Osaka in the dream.

"Sayama-kun!"

She flipped over, got down from the bed, and ran over to the blanket curled up on the dark floor. She ignored the chill of the floor on her bare feet as she did so.

"S-Sayama-kun, were the people running in that dream your…?"

"They were likely my parents."

"R-right. Then that was Osaka, wasn't it? Based on the date given

on that electronic sign and your parents' presence, was that a scene from the past when they went to help with the Great Kansai Earthquake?"

She assumed he would agree, but his response was not that, yet not quite the opposite either.

He used a vague wording that was unusual for him.

"Was it really?"

●

Shinjou tilted her head at that question coming from the blanket.

"Eh?"

Her tone of confusion must have reached Sayama because he peeled away the blanket to reveal himself.

He wore white pajamas and Shinjou sat down nearby when she saw the paleness in his face.

"Oh, are you okay? Does your chest hurt?"

"Yes," he admitted.

He gave a look that was both relieved and expressionless, but the lack of light kept her from seeing it properly.

Instead of moving away to turn on the lights, she approached so as not to miss the look on his face.

"Thank you," he said. "I was in a lot of pain and I found myself relying on you. You helped a lot."

"Do you really think that's the part of me you should be relying on?"

"No, but you were asleep. I wanted to avoid interrupting your peaceful sleep, so I decided to use a part of you far from your brain. …Did I do something wrong?"

"Butt spirits sure are making awful excuses these days."

Despite her words, she gave a silent sigh of relief.

Sayama would often keep silent about anything related to his relatives, especially his parents. This was the same, but she was glad that he had come to her when he was in pain.

…Even if his method couldn't have been more wrong.

"Anyway, to get back on topic, why do you think they weren't on the way to help with the earthquake?"

"Well," he said while crossing his arms with his back against the side of the bed. "Simply put, German Inspector Diana-kun and the

mechanical dragons were zooming along through the sky. If anyone from Osaka had seen that, their utter astonishment would have led them to give one hell of a tsukkomi."

"I sense a bit of a prejudice about people from Osaka there, but you're right."

"Yes. We may be used to those crazy scenes, but it makes no sense for those things to exist in the real world. And you do not need swords or other weapons for earthquake relief. Also…"

He crossed his arms even tighter and raised his eyebrows a little.

"Not only were there were no normal people in that Osaka, but Osaka Castle was half-destroyed in the Great Kansai Earthquake, yet it was completely destroyed there. …In that case, the answer is simple. A concept space covered the entirety of Osaka and a battle occurred there. In other words, it is possible the secondary damages that killed my father did not actually exist and some other event occurred instead."

"You mean.…"

Sayama looked to her with a small smile on his pale face.

"Their enemy was likely the predecessor to the Army, which is now plaguing us. They fought that organization in Osaka…and my father and many others died. The one piece of good fortune is that it occurred in a concept space. Creating the space only requires a few percentage points of the world's child string vibration, so the destruction inside is not what caused the Great Kansai Earthquake in reality."

And…

"The Army will probably arrive before long, but there is something we must complete in a hurry before that. You and I will be separately pursuing our pasts, but there is something else we must do first."

"Hm? There's something we have to do before our trips?"

When he heard her question, Sayama gave a sigh of confusion while still looking pale.

"Yes. I have already sent a proposal to the old man. We can discuss it more once I check on the current situation. …And listen, Shinjou-kun. I have a request."

"Wh-what is it?"

He closed his eyes and suddenly collapsed toward her.

“Eh? Ah, wait! Sayama-kun!?”

“My apologies. It seems I saw too much of the past. I am about to pass out, so could you lend me your lap until I come to? After all, we are leaving on our trips after Manager Kashima’s lecture on the Gears’ formation. I want to touch you while I can.”

With that, he went limp and laid on her lap as nothing but weight and flesh.

She frantically held and supported him, but he had already lost consciousness.

“Sayama-kun.”

She gulped and slowly spoke to the pale face on her lap.

“You just said something very important, you know? If your father and the others died in a battle with the Army’s predecessor instead of in secondary damages from the earthquake, it would completely overturn the reason for and meaning of UCAT’s blank period.”

Of course, even if that was true, the battle occurred in Low-Gear after the Concept War came to an end. It had nothing to do with the other Gears. Even so, something still bothered her.

…But in that case, why did Ooshiro-san and the others make the blank period in the first place?

And…

…What is it Sayama-kun said we have to do before our trips?

“What could it be?” she asked herself without expecting an answer and while brushing a hand through Sayama’s bangs.

She wiped away the sweat on his forehead and lowered the ends of her eyebrows.

“And you know I was taken in by UCAT right after the Great Kansai Earthquake, don’t you?”

After pausing to take a breath, she slowly asked a question.

“Does that mean I was taken in during that battle?”

Chapter 2

“Unknown Beginning”

The sun and the moon, words and thoughts
None of them can be seen

●

The long hand of a clock audibly moved.

That black hand arrived at the number twelve and the shorter hand reached the number eight.

Only one gaze turned to that clock high on a white wall. It belonged to a young woman sitting in an office chair in front of a wide white desk.

“Eight at night, hm? You get no sense of time underground like this.”

She sat in a small room with shuttered windows along the wall in front of her.

The room itself was long widthwise, so there was not much room between the desk and the wall behind her. In front of her was a desk with a console attached, a PC she used as control equipment, and three monitors.

One of the monitors displayed a progress bar giving the percentage of some work. The text above the bar said “Currently sealing concept in philosopher’s stone. D-don’t touch!”

“I still can’t get used to how they do things here.”

The woman who commented on the monitor wore a lab coat over an open-necked red shirt.

Attached to the breast pocket of the lab coat was a photo ID giving the name Tsukuyomi Miyako. The top of the ID had a blue line saying “Trainee”.

She flicked the ID and opened the collar of the lab coat.

Next, she pulled something resembling a cigarette from her pocket and stuck it in her mouth.

“Plum flavor, hm?” she said with a frown.

She then stood up and the chair moved out of her way and tilted its head. She lightly patted the chair’s back as if soothing it and turned to the clock.

But she continued to frown.

“Odd. Why haven’t the Moirai shown up to call me for dinner yet?”

She just about called out to Gyes who would be waiting outside the closed entrance to the room, but she stopped. The combat automaton who could hear her voice through the soundproofed door

had only just returned from Tokyo. Miyako didn't know if she could even get exhausted, but it would be best to be a little considerate here.

…After all, I hear things were pretty exciting over there.

Gyes's travel pay had been 750 yen an hour, but the automaton had raised it to 780 in a phone negotiation on the way back.

Miyako thought that level of meddling was for the best.

She then began to walk, quickly arrived at the door, and pressed the open/close button labelled "strong".

The door flew forcefully open and the corridor came into view. It was actually wider than the room.

An instant later, Miyako saw Gyes in front of her, but the automaton was doing something odd.

She rotated backwards while flying right to left down the corridor.

"…"

The sudden turn of events left Miyako confused and her frown grew.

She thought about the situation, but thinking about anything too complex was not her forte. When arguing, her seminar professor had told her write out a bulleted list to simplify her points. He had been arrested for some blatant hidden cameras the other day, though.

At any rate, she thought about the situation

- I'm looking at the corridor and Gyes just flew down it.
- Gyes just landed.
- Can I maybe get out of doing my thesis paper since my professor was arrested?
- The wind is moving and something's coming from the right.

Her thoughts ended at that last point and she heard a voice that sounded a lot like her own.

- **—There is no mutual understanding.**

"What?"

She understood this was a concept text, but she had to think about something else first.

…Something's coming from the right.

But she did not understand what was coming from the right.

She looked down the corridor and saw that someone was arriving from the entrance there. But…

"…?"

She could not understand. It was not just that she did not know who was coming. She could not even comprehend what was coming.

Shocked, she shouted out.

"Gyes!?"

She turned the other way where Gyes was standing up.

However, she could not understand that either. Gyes was standing, but she did not understand what that meant.

"Huh?"

What she did understand was why she could not understand.

…I don't understand what she's trying to do!

Gyes faced Miyako's general direction, swung her right arm, and gave a shout. Miyako could hear the words and see her expression. The automaton's eyebrows were raised and the look in her eyes was sharp.

"Lady Miyako! Return to your room!!"

She heard the voice, but she did not understand what Gyes was trying to convey.

In the same way, she understood that something was coming from the other end of the corridor, but she could not sense the intention behind it.

This space was completely lacking the ability to read another's intentions.

It was a space where one could never have mutual understanding with another.

…This ain't good.

Human thoughts were generally created in response to movements in the external world, so what would happen without that?

She thought and reached a conclusion.

"What a pain," she said while giving a bitter smile that would reach no one. "It just means you have to get by without looking to others."

She pulled a stone from her pocket. It looked a lot like pumice made from hardening a blue powder.

“I’ll be doing this whether you like it or not. Someone ordered this for the New Year’s party, but I can use it as an additional text here.”

With that, she crushed the stone between her fingers.

Blue light scattered, the space shook, and a voice reached her ears.

- **—You and I are cherry blossom classmates.**

A moment later, she sensed a single thought within that previously empty space.

It was Gyes.

She saw the automaton looking at her in surprise.

“Lady Miyako!? Classmates!? I could not possibly be so bold!”

“Stop being so awestricken. This concept creates a perfect understanding between two individuals with some kind of common factor. …But it only lasts the length of one song. Assume this only lasts about five minutes, Gyes.”

Miyako produced a footstep as she took a step back and reentered the opened door.

She looked back and saw two figures approaching while wrapped in white waves of water vapor that resembled wind and mist.

They wore black jumpsuits and black masks. They both had the builds of slender men, one was unarmed, but the other held a giant Azure Dragon Sword.

Miyako could not see their faces and she could not grasp their intentions. She could not even tell if the weapon one held was dangerous, but she spoke to Gyes.

“Gyes, you were knocked down the corridor just now, right? That means you were hit by an attack you couldn’t tell was coming. We can’t sense their intent to attack, so we’ll be completely defenseless. However, you don’t look damaged. Do you have some way of defending against this?”

“Nothing is impossible for 3rd-Gear’s automatons. How many times must I tell you that?”

“But is losing impossible for you?”

She showed her teeth in a grin and Gyes gave a quick troubled frown.

“For now, let me say that ‘losing’ is not in my language function’s dictionary.”

“Then let me put it another way: do it. Get them, Gyes. Get them.”

Miyako crossed her arms while thinking there was no way they could lose.

“A ton of concept texts are stored down here. If they’ve made it this far, they could have already stolen some concept weapons from the sealed storage room. In fact, that’s probably where they got that sword. That means they’re thieves. They definitely are. So get them, Gyes. Don’t let them escape.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Now that’s an exciting response.”

With the chocolate cigarette still in her mouth, Miyako faced the two men in black whose intentions she could not grasp as they approached while wrapped in wind.

“I can’t see this enemy, so you show me what you can do. You have until the cherry blossom song ends.”

●

A large space filled with books was known as a library.

It had a stepped floor and the plate at the entrance said Kinugasa Library.

It was lined with bookcases, but it was now filled with the darkness of night save for one small area.

The area devoid of darkness was near the bookcases by the counter.

Light filled a large whiteboard on the wall behind the checkout counter. The light came from the small projector on the counter and the whiteboard acted as the screen.

A young man in a lab coat stood on the other side of the counter by the projector.

He pushed his glasses up his nose and scratched his head.

“As a representative of the development department, I, Kashima Akio, will be giving you a lecture on the formation of the eleven Gears.”

His words were directed at the eight people sitting at the table awash with faint light near the counter.

Half of them were boys and the other half were girls.

Kashima had a certain thought when he looked to them.

…Things sure have gotten lively around here.

The eight were Sayama, Shinjou, Izumo, Kazami, Hiba, Mikage, Harakawa, and Heo.

…What a complicated group.

As they were at the school, Shinjou was wearing her boy's uniform, but she would be a girl at this time of day.

Izumo and Kazami appeared normal enough, but they were plenty strange. Hiba had brought Mikage along for this lecture, but her legs were still not working perfectly and he had grabbed her butt while supporting her earlier.

Heo was America's temporary inspector despite being so young and Kashima had heard Harakawa was a figure fanatic.

This really is a diverse group of kids, he thought.

And before they had taken their seats, Sayama had mentioned something strange.

It was about a dream of the past that Baku had shown them.

Kashima had not interfered because it was a Team Leviathan issue, but it had apparently been related to the secondary damages of the Great Kansai Earthquake that had supposedly killed Sayama's father and others.

…But he says it might have been a battle with the Army instead.

Kashima did not know what that meant and neither did the children here.

They only knew there had likely been a battle, many of their parents had died there, and UCAT had hidden the records for some reason.

Sayama had said not to tell anyone else about it because that could lead to further information being locked down.

They expect to reach the truth eventually, Kashima told himself.

But he had something else to do right now, so he crossed his arms and nodded.

"Now, I would first like for you to look at what I will display here."

"Manager Kashima, what was that deep expression you got when looking at us just now?"

"Nothing, Kazami-kun. It just means I have my own thoughts."

He ignored Kazami's glare, pulled his laptop from his coat pocket, and connected it to the projector.

The projector's light prepared to display the laptop's screen and the eight at the table held their breath in anticipation.

A moment later, the six square meter whiteboard displayed a video of a small child. A woman held the baby in a small yard and the baby said "ah" while reaching for a red flower on a trellis.

Kashima turned to them all.

"See how cute she is?" he said calmly. "No, wait. Please don't throw things at me. Definitely not a full drink can. At least not that."

He ducked below the counter to avoid the flying objects and sighed.

…Students these days need to learn to keep their cool.

Once they stopped throwing things, he stood up and found Kazami waiting with a dictionary on standby. She sighed and spoke in annoyance.

"Listen, Manager Kashima. I know she's cute and all, but…"

"S-so you do understand!? …Wait. I said not to throw things."

They really do have short fuses, he thought while seeing them all glare at him.

…How can they do that when she's so cute?

"Well, we can skip past the important part if you want. Let's get the trivial lecture over with."

"Your sense of value seems a bit off, but please continue, Manager Kashima."

He nodded and pressed a button on the console.

…I wonder if it would be all right if I played at least one more Harumi video.

I do have a good one I've been saving, he thought. *That one I took with the waterproof camera in the bath is to die for. Come to think of it, that would be Harumi's first all-nude exhibition and Natsu-san joins us in the bath later. That was a lot of fun, but should I go for that one here?*

However, he abandoned the idea when he saw Kazami preparing a second dictionary.

"Now then," he said while displaying a black space on the whiteboard. "The eleven worlds formed within this black empty space. Please watch."

He looked to the darkness on the whiteboard and a single color suddenly appeared. It was a large aqua-blue circle.

“A circle,” said Mikage.

Hiba patted her head and praised her like she was a baby.

He might be able to understand what makes Harumi so great, thought Kashima.

When he pressed the next button, the color on the whiteboard increased.

Smaller white circles were drawn inside the large aqua one.

There were ten white circles and they all had a plus sign inside.

This is how the Gears were formed according to my predecessors. First, a parent factor that included the ten positive Gears existed in empty space-…”

“That’s a lot of boobs! …Ah, I-I’m sorry, Chisato. I just thought someone had to say it.”

Kashima ignored the sounds of impacts that followed. He pictured his wife’s breasts in his mind and felt the boy needed further training if he was still saying those things out loud.

“Anyway, this large aqua circle is the parent factor and the ten small white circles with plus signs are the child factors that became the ten Gears. In other words, they’re the Gears’ Concept Cores.”

“In that case, would the parent factor be the Primary Concept Core that is created when all other Concept Cores are gathered?” asked Sayama.

“You can look at it like that. But this did not simply create a Gear.”

“Why not?” asked Shinjou. “It looks like a Gear that has gathered all the concepts to me.”

“If it was, it would have been a perfect Gear with only positive concepts. It would not have been destroyed.”

“Oh,” said Shinjou and Kashima lightly tapped the whiteboard.

“That is why we view the parent factor as ‘chaotic’. It included elements of all ten Gears, after all. And this is what happened to that chaotic parent factor.”

He pressed a button on his computer and the aqua circle containing the ten white circles suddenly broke.

Everyone gave comments of surprise as the ten white circles flew outwards on the whiteboard.

“As you can see, the parent factor burst from oversaturation and the ten positive concepts were sent outwards. Some researchers say the big bang that created our universe occurred at the same time.”

The ten circles started to move away, but something held them back.

At the center of their radiating paths, a new color formed in the darkness where the parent factor had been.

It was a black circle with an outline even darker than the surrounding darkness.

As that circle grew larger, the ten surrounding white circles slowed.

A symbol then appeared inside the black circle. Once the circle reached the same size as the other ten, a minus sign appeared. In fact, ten minus signs appeared inside it.

By the time the ten minus signs formed within the black circle, the ten white circles had completely stopped moving away.

Next, another change came over the footage. The ten plus-sign circles and the minus-sign circle had been drawn as two-dimensional circles so far, but they now changed to three-dimensional spheres.

The eleven spheres floated in a dark background much like an atomic model. The black sphere sat in the center and the ten white spheres with plus signs inside began to orbit around it.

They circled it.

Each of the ten Gears took its own path and began its circular orbit. They would occasionally cross paths and occasionally dive toward the negative sphere as if something was pulling them in. When that happened, they would break through the sphere and then return to their original orbit.

“This is the primary theory at the moment,” said Kashima. “The force of the parent factor’s explosion and the repelling force it created were what formed the ten negative Concept Cores in the space between the ten positive Concept Cores. Those are what became Low-Gear, which holds all the other Gears in place.”

Shinjou raised her hand, so he nodded toward her and she tilted her head.

“Why do the orbits of the Gears sometimes change suddenly so they dive into Low-Gear and head back out again?”

“It’s thought to be caused by interference between the Gears. As the Gears overlap, the Concept Cores change a little and take on an unnecessary burden. That burden acts as a weight that briefly pulls the world into the negative direction. However, falling into the negative removes the burden and it quickly recovers to its original orbit. And then…”

As he operated his computer, the ten white spheres indicating the Gears orbited and occasionally broke through the black sphere of Low-Gear before returning to their orbits.

However, those descents grew more frequent. Again and again, their orbits shrank and grew tighter.

“Eh?” said all the students.

All of the white spheres dove toward the black sphere at once.

The movement stopped and a single number appeared on the screen: 1999.

“That was the time of destruction that should have happened. All of the Gears would have overlapped and interfered with each other more than ever before. That would have thrown off the balance of Low-Gear and its negative concepts, so the Gear would have destroyed itself. Then, the other Gears would have repeatedly

collided with each other until only the Gear with the most concepts survived.”

Sayama was the next to speak and he crossed his arms along with Baku on his head.

“And that caused the Concept War, correct?”

“Yes. And now that Low-Gear has survived, all of the negative and positive Concept Cores are gathered in the one Gear, which preserves the balance. But the negative activation is affecting that balance which will send us too far in the negative direction and destroy us.”

“I see.”

They all nodded except for one who tilted her head.

It was Shinjou again and she raised her hand.

“U-um? Something about that seems odd.”

“What is it?” asked Kashima with a bit of expectation in his voice.

“Why can we exist in a negative Gear?”

So you noticed, he thought while nodding at her question.

“A good question. Despite this being a space of only negative concepts, a world was created while taking pieces of the other Gears’ cultures. It has no special abilities, but the people can live and it has since accepted in the other Gears’ positive concepts. And for some reason, the positive Concept Cores and the negative Concept Cores can both exist in Low-Gear at the same time.”

“Why is that?”

Kashima puffed out his chest proudly as he gave his answer.

“We don’t know. We have yet to reach a conclusion on that. We can come up with a number of reasons just like our predecessors, but there is no clear explanation. …From a concept point of view, I think it’s best to just say that’s how this world works.”

He went on to end the program that displayed the formation of the eleven Gears. Credits containing Kashima’s name in every field began to scroll with images of Harumi and Natsu in the background.

“That was short, but how about we end the lecture here?”

As soon as he said that, a sound filled the quiet library.

It was the ringing of cellphones. Seven of them to be exact.

The cellphones of each member of Team Leviathan except Izumo were ringing.

Sayama’s was the first to stop and he pressed the phone to his ear

while slowly looking across the others.

Finally, he spoke.

“Attackers have appeared at UCAT’s Izumo branch?”

●

Gyes performed her combat maneuvers.

She ran swiftly forward and looked at the opponent there.

She had two enemies. Both were slender men who wore black and hid their faces behind masks.

She could see them, but she could not perceive them well.

There was an intention behind every active action of something with a will of its own. Anyone who viewed it would subconsciously sense that intention and react accordingly. That was where the idea of feints and intimidation came from.

However, this enemy had cut off that intention with a concept preventing mutual understanding.

That meant she could see their actions but could not understand them.

…It’s like a strengthened version of 2nd-Gear’s Art of Walking.

The Art of Walking was a type of martial arts and could thus be broken, but this was a concept and thus could not. On top of that, this concept prevented one from understanding anything else in the world and the opponent was just a part of that.

“——————”

An attack was coming. Or at least, there was a high probability one was.

The man on the right which Gyes decided to designate as Black 1 swung his two meter Azure Dragon Sword from the right.

…Is something coming?

Gyes tried to use her prediction to perceive her opponent’s actions.

He swung the giant blade horizontally toward her body, but the meaning behind that action simply did not reach her brain.

She did not view it as dangerous.

Whether they were optical, thermal, or acoustic, all of her sensory devices were functioning, but she could not read the intentions behind the man’s actions.

And that was why she received the attack without even thinking

about dodging.

The blade reached her stomach and the steel curve sank into her red suit.

It would easily slice her slender body in two.

But just before it did, she reacted.

"———!"

She reacted in two ways.

First, a smile formed on her lips.

Second, her mechanical reflexes activated.

She had directed her reflexes inside her own body.

She poured every last bit of her thoughts into the less than a hundredth of a second that the blade touched her suit.

The enemy's sword drove into her suit and applied a slight pressure to it as it cut through.

The inside of the suit pressed her shirt into her artificial skin which caused a distortion in the skin even thinner than the nano scale.

She understood that extremely tiny distortion of her skin as it was her own information.

Whatever may have happened to her understanding of the outside world, she could understand a reaction within her own body.

And her body was telling her something was contacting her artificial flesh.

Only now did she grasp that she was in danger and that she was under attack.

She could not see it or hear it, but she could feel it in her skin.

…But I have determined that is enough!!

Her mechanical reflexes and athletic ability allowed her to move with the blade still touching her stomach.

She moved back to match the swing of the blade.

It was more of a leap than a back step and more of a rotation than a turn.

She quickly spun and matched the speed of the horizontally swung Azure Dragon Sword.

She rotated on her heel and swung her body to dance with the blade against her stomach.

And only then did she achieve her true goal.

The force of the blade's swing reaching her body through her skin

allowed her to calculate the estimated location of her enemy.

Her mechanical calculations reached the answer in an instant.

"There!!"

She pulled a sword from her sleeve and jabbed it right toward that unperceived location.

The tip of the blade easily broke the sound barrier.

With the sound of a bursting paper bag, it produced an explosion of water vapor and wind.

As for the enemy on the other end of that blade tip…

"!"

Gyes saw him avoid the blade and move back, but she could not understand that either.

She only knew he had evaded it because she did not feel the recoil of a hit as she swung.

…*Kh.*

She now knew this enemy could evade such a quick attack.

That meant he was an automaton or had reflexes on that level.

Who could it be? she wondered.

"It can't be."

She suddenly reached a certain answer.

She knew who this was and what Gear had created the opponent's before her, even if it was a Gear she had had almost no contact with during the Concept War.

"In that case…"

She knew who stood before her.

"!?"

She felt heat on her skin to the left.

This was something fired by the man to that side.

This heat told her there was a sun there.

Not fire, not flames, not a torch, and not even an inferno.

This sphere of heat was known as a sun.

It was big enough to fill the large corridor and it was moving at the speed of a thrown ball.

The mass of heat that was a small sun should not have existed in this world, but it flew straight toward Gyes.

It was relatively slow, but its heat was massive. Simply touching it would likely be enough to destroy her entire body.

But Gyes had no way of avoiding it. That was partially due to its

size and heat, but it had more to do with Miyako's room being right behind her.

She could not avoid it. As the shield and weapon meant to oppose the enemy's attack, evasion was not an option.

That meant it would hit, but that was also when she grew convinced of this enemy's identity.

"You are-…!!"

She shouted toward the enemy standing unseen beyond the sun.

At the same time, the mass of heat before her suddenly broke apart.

With nothing more than the sound of a cement block breaking, the sun crumbled.

It had been destroyed by someone who had arrived behind her. And just by touching it.

●

Gyes gasped at the destruction of the sun.

"———!?"

The light's destruction took less than a second and the world dispersed at the same time.

The concept space had been eliminated.

The light vanished, the world of no mutual understanding vanished, the heat vanished, and Gyes's sense of danger returned.

The spray of hot light scattered like feathers and the Moirai ran down the corridor beyond it. They all looked panicked, but they had likely been unable to move within that concept space.

…I can leave Lady Miyako to them.

With that thought, Gyes turned toward the one who had smashed the sun as it approached her.

"Who are you?"

Her question was directed toward a man.

The man was in his prime and nearly two meters tall. His hair was swept back on the sides, he was well-built, and he wore a white suit.

Once she noticed his appearance, Gyes commented before he could answer her question.

"That is quite a loud outfit."

"Oh, well, I don't really see what's wrong with it. I thought you might agree, Gyes-kun, what with that midriff-exposing suit and all."

The man's casual comment led her to look down at herself. Due to rotating along with the strike of the Azure Dragon Sword, her scarlet suit and shirt were missing from the below the chest and down.

It did not look good, but she determined it had improved the ventilation and heat radiation. She then gave a questioning frown and asked her question again.

"Who are-…?"

"Oh, well, hm. I'd heard we had intruders, so I was hiding back there with my knees trembling."

Gyes frowned even further because "back there" was the stairway down to the third basement.

"But that area is off limits."

"Hm? Do you want to know why I came from there by any chance?"

"Not really."

"Yes, yes. Good, good. Not asking any unnecessary questions is for the best. You know what you're doing."

The man crossed his arms and nodded several times while refusing to listen to her.

The next action came from Miyako. She exited the door behind Gyes and looked both ways to make sure it was safe.

"Gyes, is it over?"

"Yes, sir. This man here saved me."

Hearing that, Miyako frowned, looked at the man in the white suit, and tilted her head.

"Hey, old man. This area's for authorized personnel only. Saving Gyes is fine and all, but you shouldn't be here."

"If it's fine, it's fine, right? Isn't that how it works, Tsukuyomi-kun?"

Miyako's confused frown grew more at the fact that he knew her name than at what he said.

Finally, she tilted her head again and clicked her tongue toward the floor.

"Who are you? And do you have a thing for looking up people's names? Hey, Gyes. Have this guy leave. Oh, but don't forget to thank him for saving you."

The man showed off his teeth in a bitter smile and Moira 1st

called out as she ran up.

"L-Lady Miyako! That loud person is actually IAI's president, Izumo Retsu! He is also Japanese UCAT's assistant director!!"

Gyes and Miyako both looked back at Retsu.

As he stood in the center of the corridor, he nodded at Moira 1st's explanation and raised a hand toward Miyako and Gyes.

"Hi."

"Don't just say hi! What's the head of this place doing here?"

"Oh, well, hm. Can't I just say that's a secret? I'm not real good at explaining things. I did save you, so I'd like it if you'd let me go without too much trouble. …How about it?"

"Fine, fine."

Miyako nodded and put her hands on her hips, but she also frowned and glared at Retsu.

"But you're telling me as much as you can, old man. Who were those men? And…"

Her shout asked the question Gyes had wondered earlier.

"I something bad happening with the Leviathan Road!?"

●

Inside the unlit Kinugasa Library, eight people were gathered around the central table.

They were Sayama and the other members of Team Leviathan.

As their leader, Sayama set down his cellphone in front of the others.

That black phone had been issued by UCAT.

They all looked down toward the silent cellphone, but Sayama alone raised his head.

"Now, then."

His words broke through the silence and gathered the others' gazes.

With their focus on him, he expressionlessly formed words.

"It seems the attackers have been driven from Izumo UCAT. However, it also seems some powerful healing charms and a few prototype weapons that were sealed there after their development were stolen."

"The one piece of luck is that no one was hurt. Still…"

Kazami stood in front of Sayama and crossed her arms and

Shinjou gave an uneasy look from Sayama's left.

"Were the attackers from the Army?"

"If so, this means they did not harm their opponents and fled after nothing more than stealing some concept weapons. …That is not like them."

"But," hesitantly began Shinjou before continuing. "But if they weren't the Army, who were they?"

"Whoever they are, there is one thing we now know: we are targets for attack. That is for sure."

He looked away from Shinjou and toward the others.

"We possess the nine Concept Cores excluding 7th's and a few of those are being used as weapons. That means we are the ones with a god of war, mechanical dragon, and other weapons that far exceed the level of modern technology."

They all nodded after a moment.

After that and an exchanged look, Kazami spoke up.

"But doesn't this seem dangerous? And Sayama, it seems especially dangerous for you and Shinjou to act on your own. No, this doesn't just go for the two of you. Thinking about Team Leviathan and the rest of UCAT, wouldn't it be best if you didn't go to Okutama and Sakai?"

After a breath, she shrugged a little.

"As for that dream of Baku's you mentioned, there might be some records in the second reference room, so why not check there for now? You shouldn't head out too much."

Shinjou understood what Kazami was saying. As their comrade, she did not want them moving around.

And she had likely chosen to be the one to say it because of her position as an upperclassman among them.

Sensing that intention, Shinjou brought her chin to her chest.

…Hm, is it really that dangerous to move around like that?

She brought a hand to her mouth and looked up at Sayama's face.

"Kazami-san's right. It would be dangerous if the Army attacked, wouldn't it?"

She looked up at him while asking and found he had crossed his arms at some point.

He gave an expressionless nod, but…

…Eh?

Something was off. She could tell he had some other thought.

His crossed arms and nod showed his understanding but not his agreement.

…He must have his own thoughts on this incident and how we should handle it.

Kazami's suggestion had been meant to bind them together. She was saying they should stay together and combine their great power to face the coming troubles. Everyone should have agreed without issue.

…But what is Sayama-kun thinking?

She saw him turn his eyes toward her.

His expression had changed, but the slight change on his lips was so subtle only she would have noticed it.

It was a small smile that seemed to ask her if she had noticed.

But he soon wiped the smile away and looked forward.

Shinjou did the same as if following the vanished expression.

Everyone was there. These were the comrades they had gained in their past fights.

They had strength, they had their own reasons, and they all helped each other.

And Sayama spoke expressionlessly to them all.

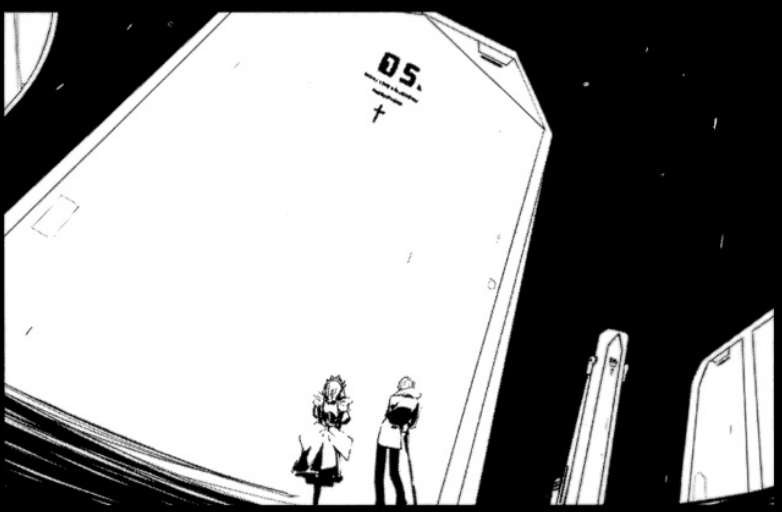
"This is indeed an excellent time for an attack. The only remaining Concept Core is 7th-Gear's. Also, tonight's attack might very well have been a warning to tell us what would happen if Shinjou-kun and I leave here. …And that is why I have an announcement. Effective immediately…"

His voice filled the library.

"Team Leviathan will disband."

Chapter 3

“Lone Defiance”



Do you grow defiant
Because you have lost?
Is it a smoldering resentment?

●

In a large dark space, the ceiling could not be seen overhead and the four walls were only visible due to the faint illumination.

The vast space was several kilometers long, but it was not filled with darkness.

The color of illumination filled it without any actual light.

Shadows fell from the ceiling, but the shadows were the only darkness in the thoroughly illuminated space.

That illumination was dim, but it was even across the entire space.

Two new shadows appeared in that space filled only with the shadows from above.

The shadows produced two sets of footsteps and the sound of metal jabbing into the floor.

The former were the footsteps of a man and girl wearing black. The latter was the sound of the man's metal cane.

As the metallic sound continued, the man spoke to the girl following behind him.

"Well, Sf? What do you have to say about this space?"

"Tes. It is approximately three kilometers long and five hundred meters wide. I believe it is located approximately three hundred meters underground."

"Hah. What a dull answer. Don't you have a subroutine for giving stupid answers to your master's questions?"

"Tes. I have determined such a subroutine would displease you. Our time together is to be harmonious, so it would not be a desirable function."

"Sf, from what I've seen, our time together always angers me."

Itaru gave a dubious look and Sf nodded toward his back.

"Tes. Your blood pressure never rises above average. A high average, but average."

"Tell me what I'm supposed to do if I have questions about that decision of yours."

"Tes." Sf nodded again with her usual expressionless look. "Itaru-sama, try to grow up. …Of course, that is something I cannot understand as an automaton."

Itaru silently faced forward and quickened his pace and Sf

followed with long strides.

Her voice rang out along with their overlapping footsteps.

“But what is this place? I can guess it is some sort of storage room, but that is all.”

“In that case, Sf, try telling me where we are.”

“Tes.” She nodded for the third time. “This is the sixth basement of Japanese UCAT. It should be beyond the bottom of the massive pit in the fifth basement’s large storage room. It is an unknown location and we passed through a concept barrier, so my reference point may be a little off.”

“No, you are correct. German UCAT’s coordinate measurement system did an excellent job of grasping our location. …To be clear, I’m not praising you here.”

“Tes. Do not worry. I am fair in my work and I take pride in my own functionality. Therefore, praising me for another’s work or simply for being an automaton would be an insult to all machines.”

And…

“However, I am not to let you do any unnecessary work and that means you will never receive praise. …Ergo, you are unworthy of praise. That was your own request.”

“Hah. So I’m worthless, am I? That’s the highest praise you could give me. Every so often, the heartless expressions of a machine can tell the truth.”

“Tes. I will interpret that as praise of my word choice.”

Itaru slowed his pace, looked over his shoulder, and clearly frowned toward her.

“What kind of nonsense is that? …Follow me.”

“Tes. That praise far exceeds the upper limit I had set for myself.”

She jogged to catch up and fell into step just behind him.

“Where are we going, Itaru-sama?”

He stopped without replying, but that was because they had arrived at the center of the large space.

The space was empty, but…

“Is this…?”

Sf frowned as she looked into the surrounding emptiness.

Her lifted gaze saw countless representations of objects in every direction.

They were collections of shadow.

Those faint shadows had a shape only visible when straining one's eyes, but the space was filled with countless cubes measuring several dozen meters across.

As Sf looked overhead and slowly rotated on her heel, Itaru spoke.

"This is the center of the concept space where the string vibration density is highest. That is why the truth of this space is visible here. Tell me what you think those giant shadows are, Sf."

"I have determined they are rooms. It is a floor that was purged and sealed inside the concept space."

"They were not purged. They are merely not allowed to exist."

"Not allowed? By who?"

The master did not answer his maid's question. Instead, he let out a weary sigh.

"My generation's UCAT is here."

"…"

"Ten years ago when it was sealed here, I never thought things would turn out like this. It's ridiculous, Sf. Our place is now nothing but a storeroom."

Before he finished speaking, Sf spotted a certain fact.

Ten manmade objects sat on the floor that had been empty before.

"Those are the Concept Core storage pallets."

They were large white pallets meant to transport something. Like giant bento boxes, they could be fully sealed and they all had different sizes.

The farthest and second farthest to the left were only about three meters across, but the third was as large as a god of war transport pallet and the fourth was a half cylinder like a plastic greenhouse.

The fifth was the largest at over fifty meters across, the sixth was about the size of the first two, the seventh was a car-sized pallet divided into four blocks, and the eighth, ninth, and tenth were the about the same as the first.

Sf glanced across the pallets that had suddenly appeared before them.

"The string vibrations shook…and then settled. I have determined that which was hidden has revealed itself. I also detect 1st, 2nd, and

9th concepts."

"That's right. Gram, Yamata, and B-Sp are here. They have a will of their own, so they must have come to greet us along with their concealed storage space. They can feel it," he said while looking at the pallets. "They can sense the gathering of their comrades who once created worlds and fought them and they can sense the ones that desire them. And…they wish to see the answer."

"The answer?"

"You don't know what I mean? Remember the Army? If they are going to make their move, it'll be now. They will attack just before the Leviathan Road is completed by acquiring 7th's Concept Core. I assume they intend to defeat Team Leviathan, steal the Concept Cores gathered here, and perhaps take hostages so they can demand any Concept Cores they lack. …It's quite simple."

"Tes. It is a simple sort of terrorism. But where is the crucial 7th-Gear Concept Core? Also…" She looked across the white pallets before her. "Are the Concept Cores not allies of Team Leviathan?"

"You will understand before long. But to put it simply, these Concept Cores want to hear the Army's side of the story too. For now, I'll just say this: they want to know the foundation of the Army's righteousness and where they have taken that righteousness."

When she heard bitterness in his voice, Sf turned to look at him.

He had a smile on his face and that smile bared his teeth while he looked directly ahead.

"Sf, did you hear about the attack on Izumo UCAT?"

"Tes. I hear Gyes-sama is working on an estimated criminal profile."

"That's going to have an interesting answer, but it'll probably take a few hours to reach it."

Sf frowned, but Itaru did not elaborate. The bitter smile on his lips said something else instead.

"The Army and a mysterious attacker are both on the move, but do you know what? That selfish Sayama sent my old man the paperwork for disbanding Team Leviathan. And tonight, he's apparently entering the mountains to look for Professor Kinugasa's house. Meanwhile Shinjou is taking a trip to Sakai to track down Shinjou Yukio."

He slammed his cane against the floor and the noise echoed throughout the empty space.

“He has to know this is no time to leave, but Sayama is fixated on this information from the past. Why do you think he has chosen to leave the safety of Shinjou and his other teammates even though it could very well put himself and them in danger? Do you know, Sf?”

“No, but I do not need to know,” said Sf. “No matter what happens, they will carry out the Leviathan Road. There is no need for me to give the answer in their stead. I have determined their answer belongs to them and it is none of our business.”

“Hah. In other words, we should keep our mouths shut and watch what these selfish kids do?”

“Tes.”

She nodded and took a step forward to stand by his side.

The ten white pallets were lined up in front of her and she opened her mouth in front of those containers that were each meant to hold a world.

“I have determined there is no need for us to guess at the answer to their resolve. After all, they will find that answer themselves. And until they do, we can rest easy, make no attempt to understand their actions, and make fun of them.”

“Are you trying to turn your master into a sarcastic person?”

“Tes,” she agreed while gently turning toward him left and bowing. “I have determined there is a reason for your actions, so please be derisive of all things, show bitterness to both the heavens and the earth, and let loose the ultimate sarcasm that can eat through both steel and flesh.”

She took a breath and closed her eyes while still bent in a bow.

“Once they learn the reason why, I have determined everyone will pour their thanks onto you.”

●

“H-hold on. Disband!? Why would we do that?”

A girl’s voice filled a dry library.

It was Kazami’s and it was accompanied by hurried footsteps.

She circled behind the others who sat around the table as she made her way behind the boy standing on the opposite end of the table.

By the time she arrived, he had already turned his expressionless face toward her.

Kazami stood in front of Sayama and ignored how Shinjou's shoulders trembled next to him and how Baku's fur bristled on his head.

"Listen, Sayama. What do you mean Team Leviathan will disband?"

Everyone else moved back at her sharp tone of voice, but Sayama remained unfazed.

She then began to think. Was she questioning him head-on because she thought it was her duty or because she personally felt angry with what he had said?

…It doesn't matter.

She decided she would be asking him either way.

"Harakawa and Heo joined a month ago and we've gathered plenty of power with a god of war and mechanical dragon on our team. We can fight at our best no matter who challenges us. So why do we have to disband just as the enemy is arriving!?"

"I think you may already know half the answer, Kazami."

For an instant, she did not understand what he had said.

Eh? she thought as he brought a hand to his head.

He grabbed Baku, placed the creature on the table, and turned his usual expressionless look back toward her.

"I will leave Baku behind. With Team Leviathan disbanded, he is not mine to take. I will be pursuing Professor Kinugasa out of my own interest, so I hope someone else can take care of him."

"Wha-…?"

As he spoke and ignored her protests, her thoughts ground to a halt.

She could not believe anything she was hearing.

She only understood that Sayama was trying to act on his own.

…And he has no intention to discuss it or to stop.

It felt like he was saying he would win if he remained in motion.

The term "ex post facto approval" appeared in her mind. Her dislike of the term led her to speak out of reflex.

"You can't just decide this for us! There's more to Team Leviathan than just you!"

Oh, this isn't good, thought the rational portion of her mind as she

grabbed his suit collar and pulled him toward her.

“Ah.”

Hiba started to move in, but Mikage stopped him.

“She needs to say this.”

Pushed on by those words, Kazami faced forward.

Past her pulling arm, she felt Sayama’s existence as a weight.

“You have teammates. This is the place where you can get serious, there are people who need you here, and the enemy is coming. Why are you trying to have us disband!?”

"As I said, half of the reason is already obvious."

"Not to me it isn't! You need to say it plainly!" She took a breath. "I thought I was going to die countless times, but I kept going! I even saved your life! Remember when I shot that werewolf in that Okutama forest!?"

She had been troubled by the fact that the werewolf had taken his own life, but…

…Are you saying my pain, that werewolf's death, and the fact that I protected you and Shinjou were all meaningless?

"Who do you think you are? If saving you then was meaningless, then there's no hope for us."

However, he did not immediately reply to her thoughts. It was only after a long pause that he did so.

"This is not something that can be explained in words, Kazami."

It was his usual calm voice and his words brought a certain thought to her mind.

…Oh.

That may have been true for him.

…Why would you choose now to say something like this?

It was true she might not understand it.

…But can't you at least try to explain it? We're not the same as you.

They had been through a lot together, even if for a short period of time. If they at all saw each other as teammates…

…We've worked so hard, so can't you give some kind of explanation?

"And how can you say that? Is it that hard to trust the relationship we all have?"

Sayama did not answer her question.

Kazami felt his silence solidifying her course of action.

To her, the Leviathan Road and what she had gained here were important.

…But has everything we've done been pointless to him?

She then asked her final question.

"I don't want to sound patronizing, so let me ask about the most important point again. If you don't give me a proper answer, I *will* hit you. Why should Team Leviathan disband at this crucial time of all times?"

“I do not feel like saying.”

She stopped moving or even breathing as he spoke.

“Speaking with you has told me that you are immersed in the reason for this, so you would never understand even if I did explain it to you. You would only think you understood.”

Those words led her to tighten her left-handed grip on his collar.

She swung back her right arm and Shinjou’s eyes opened wide next to him.

“S-stop! You’ll cave his skull in!!”

I hope I do, she thought while swinging her right fist. She wanted to wipe that never-changing expressionless look off of his face.

“Stop it, Chisato!”

But just before she hit, Izumo’s voice seemed to steal the perfect moment from her.

And it all ended in an instant.

Arms passed below her arms and lifted her up.

“Ah.”

Her feet rose from the floor as if she were weightless. The hand holding Sayama’s collar let go and flailed around, but she could not struggle with her wings without X-Wi on.

“W-wait, Kaku. Put me down. This is embarrassing.”

“I won’t, Chisato. If I put you down now, it won’t end well. We’ll all end up feeling bad.”

Izumo’s voice reached her from near her shoulder blades.

She suddenly realized that Hiba, Mikage, Harakawa, and Heo stood beyond Sayama and Shinjou.

Hiba was frowning and Mikage was tilting her head with her usual look.

Harakawa on the other hand was resting his head in his hand and looking off in another direction. Heo was clinging to his sleeve with a pale face.

Heo’s hand held his sleeve so tightly that it had turned white and he continued ignoring it all even though she was tugging so hard. Seeing that was a shock to Kazami.

…Oh.

The word “sorry” appeared in her mind and it led her to relax.

She felt Izumo sigh into her back.

“Hey, stupid Sayama. Can I ask you something?”

“What is it? Keep in mind that I will only answer serious questions.”

“Ha ha ha. Think back over everything I’ve ever said and go hang yourself, you idiot. …Now, are you listening? You may not be telling us your reason for this, but it’s not some stupid reason, is it?”

“I see.” Sayama frowned as if to say this was an unexpected question. “What would make you ask that? When have I ever said anything stupid?”

Shinjou expressionlessly elbowed him for that.

He curled up and held his side, but Shinjou ignored him and turned toward Kazami with the ends of her eyebrows lowered.

“Sorry. …But I’m pretty sure Sayama-kun wouldn’t give you his reason even if you killed him. And I also think all of us, myself included, will understand eventually.”

She spread her arms and got the words out quickly as if to fill the empty space.

“H-how about thinking of it like this? Team Leviathan isn’t disbanding, but Sayama-kun and I will leave just as we had planned. During that time, we will have nearly disbanded regardless of what you all think, so…”

“So while the two of you are gone, we should think about why he says we should disband? And if we haven’t found the answer by the time you return, we really will disband?”

It was true Team Leviathan could not function without those two and would have essentially disbanded. So if they realized why he wanted them to disband, they could join back together once those two returned.

…But this is a dangerous time.

Kazami brought a hand to her forehead while Izumo still held her in the air. She understood Shinjou’s compromise, but could they really leave Team Leviathan unable to function right after an attack? From a strategic standpoint, Sayama was their commander and Shinjou their gunner. Kazami could fill the role of gunner with G-Sp2’s second form.

…But who will be our commander?

“Kazami.”

She turned toward Sayama’s voice.

He pointed at her while standing up and removing his hand from

his side.

"Listen," he said expressionlessly. "In that case, I nominate you as Team Leviathan's temporary negotiator."

"What!?"

"You take command. And whether you are fighting, eating, or sleeping, allow anyone with a problem to consult with you."

She was about to protest, but a sudden high-pitched voice cut her off.

"I-I think that's a great idea!"

It was Heo.

She stood up in her gray uniform and drew back a bit as everyone turned toward her. The hand on Harakawa's sleeve did not loosen, but she blushed.

"U-um, well, as a new member, I am reluctant to admonish a superior, but…"

"Why are you following that part of Japanese culture, Heo Thunderson?"

"B-but Harakawa!"

She was half in tears as she spoke to Harakawa who was still turned away.

"We finally got to join together, but there's a bad atmosphere hanging over us right now! And, um, Kazami was about to hit Sayama's insane head with her killer ape punch that can KO a gorilla!"

She took a deep breath while ignoring the various glares she was receiving.

"I-I don't think it's right to act like thisp!!"

She stumbled over the final word.

●

Only after shouting out did Heo realize what she had done.

…Oh, no.

She had tried to say something difficult in Japanese and had end up stumbling over the word.

There was nothing wrong with that in and of itself. She would occasionally do it at school, but the girls in her class said it was cute. However…

"…"

Cold sweat poured down her back as seven silent gazes bore down on her.

Oh, no, she thought again.

…I showed weakness in front of them.

But will I be okay? Will they overlook me because I'm the youngest?

Whenever someone showed weakness, they receive an attack from a world void of sense. That seemed to be the unwritten rule of this group. The boy named Hiba would often run off to buy cans of coffee and Heo assumed that was because they were taking advantage of some weakness of his.

I have to do something, she thought and that led her to take action.

"U-um, uh…" She forced a smile. "I-I think we should try to stay positive. Okay? Okay? Isn't that right?"

The others exchanged a glance and finally nodded.

"Yes," said Sayama while crossing his arms. "I apologize, Heo-kun. We should have been more composed. Yes."

He gave a deep nod and Heo sighed in her heart. It looked like she was off the hook.

Sayama then gave a serious look to Izumo who still held Kazami.

"Izumo, Heo-kun is exactly right. Don't you agreep?"

Oh, no, calmly thought Heo as she saw Izumo nod and rub his head against Kazami's back.

"Yeah, she may have a point. We were getting a little harsh with each other. Isn't that righp?"

"Ha ha ha ha ha. Izumo, I am glad to see you are an understanding manp."

"It's all thanks to Heo. This conversation is really turning out nicelyp."

Seeing Heo fall silent, Shinjou frantically spoke up with a troubled look.

"S-Sayama-kun, Izumo-san! Don't be mean to Heo like that! She's a yankee girl who still isn't used to this foreign culture, so her Japanese isn't the best!"

Are you trying to kick me while I'm down? wondered Heo while tugging on a sleeve.

"Harakawa. What am I supposed to do when-… Why won't you

look at me!?"

"Don't drag me into this, Heo Thunderson."

She just about called him mean, but she was cut off by someone clapping their hands. The sound came from up above.

She looked over and saw Kazami frowning with her hands together.

"Okay, okay, okay. I'm sick of this, so let's get it done with. Sayama and Shinjou will go on their trips as planned and return with whatever information they find. Meanwhile, we will think about Sayama's riddle and any of you can consult with me if something happens. …That sums it up, right? But what if a representative of 7th approaches us for the Leviathan Road?"

"Tell them to wait until I return. It is only a trip into the mountains of Okutama, so it should only take me two days and one night. Until then, you can kill time by thinking about the reason for disbanding," said Sayama. "But if they wish to fight, the battle will not be a part of the Leviathan Road. Think of it like the battles with the remnants of 6th and 10th in the past."

"Okay, okay. Got it. …In other words, how to handle it is up to us. But," she said while sharpening her gaze toward him. "I still haven't accepted what you said."

"And you never will as long as you are asking me. …Look to yourself for the answer."

He gave a pause for thought before continuing.

"Oh, I know. I do have a hint for you: the answer is something even Shinjou-kun and I have. In other words, search for your own pasts. That is what this is about."

"Our pasts?"

"Yes. All of our pasts are different, but they will undoubtedly lead you to the reason I ordered for Team Leviathan to disband. … However, I do not expect you to understand at the moment because, right now, you do not desire your past."

Heo saw Kazami wrinkle her brow and turn away. She seemed to be saying he was only giving excuses and therefore was not worth listening to.

After that, silence ruled their surroundings.

Shinjou gently held Sayama's right arm and gestured toward the library entrance with her chin.

…They're leaving, aren't they?

As if answering her thought, Shinjou turned toward them. Her eyebrows were lowered, but she looked satisfied.

"I won't say I'm sorry any longer, but we'll be leaving for a bit. I'll be thinking about this while I'm gone, so let's compare our answers once I get back."

"Nn," said Mikage with a nod and Shinjou smiled.

But after a short pause, Hiba stood up and lifted his bandanna with a serious look.

"Um, uh, can I say one thing? I've been wondering something."

When Heo asked what it was, he turned to Izumo.

"Izumo-san, is it just me or have you been groping Kazami-san's breasts for a while now?"

His question left everyone dumbfounded and Izumo made a small movement.

His arms crossed each other as he held Kazami and he adjusted their position so they pointed toward the others and lifted Kazami's breasts from below.

"This is my new invention. I call it the X-Grope! Eeeeeexxxxxxxxx!"

As soon as he shouted the technique's name, both of Kazami's elbows crashed into his face.

Chapter 4

“Night of Guests”

Tonight, they visit
Tonight, they come

●

The chilly night air filled a certain space.

That large and dark space was inside an old fifty square meter prefab building.

The smell of oil lingered in the air and it had a slight industrial bitterness to it.

A deep hole covered almost the entire cement floor and the bottom was too far down to see.

The factory contained only a single light: a fluorescent desk light sitting on the round table in the balcony-like space in front of the southern office.

Next to the desk light, a filthy radio-cassette player played a tape of pop music.

Next to the table were an electric stove dirty with paint and two people.

One of the people was an elderly man in a work outfit and the other was a girl.

The man spoke quietly while reading a horse racing newspaper.

“Mikoku, this is the last song, so turn the tape around.”

“Not only does it not play CDs, but it does not have auto-reverse either? Why not buy a new one?”

“It’s an old companion and having some flaws makes it cute.”

The old manager reached for the table and grabbed a cigarette.

“It’s nice being able to smoke around you.”

“Does Shino complain that it is bad for your health?”

“She doesn’t say anything, but that’s exactly why I can’t smoke.”

He placed it in his mouth and lit a cheap lighter with just his right hand.

“The two of you haven’t been getting along lately, have you?”

“We get along fine,” said Mikoku while hiding her expression from the faint white light and holding one knee in her arms. “I only want her to stop fighting.”

“You know you both just want the best for each other, right? She’s not an enemy, so you need to actually talk to her about it.”

Her silhouette nodded at those words, but the old manager filled the air with some cigarette smoke and his voice.

“But I’m sure that isn’t happening anytime soon.”

He inhaled and gathered the smoke in his mouth.

"You've always had trouble telling people things. You're afraid of being rejected or disliked by the people you care about, so you just avoid talking about it. But…"

He added "I know I'm meddling, but hear me out" before continuing.

"Doing that means you've lost, Mikoku."

"I have not los-…"

"Shino-san wants to win alongside you. The enemy is opposing us through combat, so why are you so busy pushing your allies away? It doesn't make sense."

Those words silenced Mikoku and the old manager gave a smoky laugh. His shoulders shook in the darkness.

"You're such a child, Mikoku. You're a poor excuse for a girl. … You should really learn how to cook. That's a skill you'll need if you plan to live alone for the rest of your life."

"No one here can cook either."

"Yeah, and that's because Shino-san always brings food for us. The others all left for Hachioji when they heard you were coming today."

"So that's why they always look so displeased when I show up."

"Forgive them. They're still young and inexperienced. They don't know how to treat a girl. …Then again, the city's a much better place to celebrate finishing our work on all the equipment we need."

The old manager exhaled a long stream of smoke.

The expelled smoke stretched toward the giant hole in the floor. Alex had once filled that hole, but several other forms stood there now.

They resembled people and they formed ten columns and thirty rows.

"With those remote-controlled mass-produced dolls, this factory's ten workers can run an entire army."

"Whose decision was it to make them all female?"

"I thought it would help teach those young guys how to handle a girl. …But to be honest, we didn't have enough materials to make them male. They're based on 3rd knowledge and we didn't have time to develop a male frame. …We also have a secret weapon hidden in the cargo hold."

He gave a bitter smile.

"I feel bad for taking Alex's spot. We should've used the big underground room below the front clearing. …Of course, that's in use now too."

"We don't have room to spare with the attack so close, do we?"

Mikoku's silhouette muttered in the darkness.

"It's already tomorrow. The Army will finally attack Japanese UCAT."

●

The decision to move tomorrow certainly came suddenly, thought Mikoku.

However, their preparations were steadily progressing and the enemy was nearly done gathering the Concept Cores. The conditions were right.

…I just don't think it's time yet.

Shino, on the other hand, seemed to have been waiting for this moment.

That may be the difference between someone who will gain their role there and someone who will complete their role there, thought Mikoku as the old manager spoke to her.

"But apparently UCAT was attacked today. Tatsumi mentioned it when she stopped by, remember? Two people in black showed up at Izumo UCAT."

"And yet the Army has not been doing anything recently. …Is some other organization opposing them?"

"It's hard to say," muttered the man.

Suddenly a noise reached them from behind.

"…!?"

The two of them quickly turned around.

The loud noise came from the intercom on the wall next to the office entrance.

The electronic tone was set loud enough to be heard over factory machinery and the old manager scratched his head and sank back into his seat.

"You answer it, Mikoku. I can't even taste the cigarette when things are this loud."

"Sure."

Mikoku nodded, stood from her chair, and turned around.

She picked up the receiver and wondered who it could be. It could have been Shino, worn out from the weight of all the food she had brought for dinner.

Whoever it was, it had to be someone from the Army if they had reached the factory within the concept space.

“Who is it?” she asked into the receiver.

A slightly withered yet powerful female voice responded.

“Hey, there. You’re under attack, so open up.”

Mikoku had no idea what that meant and she did not recognize the voice.

And what were they talking about?

…We’re under attack?

Her disbelief made her hesitate and the old manager’s voice reached her from behind.

“Who is it? Is it Shino-san?”

His question was the way things should have been, but the voice from the receiver was definitely not Shino.

“…?”

She tried to say something, but she was cut off by the same withered yet powerful female voice.

“Oh? No response? I don’t like kids who do that. I don’t like them at all. So sorry, but I’m going to take this into my own hands. …I assume you have no response for that either.”

Mikoku tried to say “wait”, but she was cut off again.

“Don’t respond only when it’s convenient. Don’t block out what you don’t like.”

Those words were accompanied by red light, a great sound that pierced through Mikoku’s body, and wind.

It was an explosion.

The factory’s four-layer steel door bent in.

“…!?”

And it was destroyed.

…Wh-

She did not even finish her thought.

Instead, she began to move. Before the old manager could finish standing in surprise, she ran toward the scattering metal fragments of the door.

She dashed straight toward the attacker as if her body desired a fight.

A conditioned reflex sent her flying toward the explosive flames spreading from the factory's entrance.

Her hand grabbed the Japanese sword in a cloth wrapping leaning against the table, her feet kicked off the floor, her body tore through the explosive blast, and her skin felt the heat and light of the flames.

"Who are you!?"

She spoke the thought that had finally caught up to her and she shot outside.

She charged forward to strike the attacker waiting there.

●

A dinner table was a table carrying food.

If it was surrounded by smiles, that was even better.

A particular table contained a lot of food with plenty of variety.

Four people sat around it, two male and two female. Three of them smiled and one had a harsh look.

Of the three with smiles, the man facing the harsh look spoke.

"What's the matter, Chisato? Izumo-kun is here for once, so don't look so upset. You're ruining the good looks you got from your mother. Now, why are you angry? You can tell your papa…yes, it can be our secre- Actually, mama is smiling this way, so how about telling your papa and your mama!?"

Kazami responded to the question by stabbing her chopsticks into the top of the pile of croquettes sitting in front of her father.

It was a direct and forceful jab.

After the red chopsticks pierced into the light brown croquette, she lifted them and pointed the tip between her father's eyes.

"Sorry, dad. It's nothing, so don't worry about it. And if you insist on worrying…"

She stabbed the chopsticks into another croquette on the way back and placed the skewered food on her plate.

With the two croquettes unable to move, she slowly poured some dark sauce on top.

The sauce splashed a little, but the dark liquid stained the croquettes as if they had spewed it out themselves and it spread out

across the plate.

She skillfully lowered and raised the chopsticks to tear the two skewered items in two.

With the two croquettes split in half, she carefully wiped the oil off the chopsticks.

“Something unpleasant happened today. Do you understand, dad?”

She noticed her father had paled a little as he looked at her, so she tilted her head and grabbed the 500 mL can of beer set in front of him.

“What’s wrong, dad? Aren’t you going to eat?”

She pulled the can’s tab, the sound of carbonation escaped, and a glass approached from the side

It was Izumo’s.

She sighed toward the glass and poured the can into it while wondering if he was trying to be considerate.

She heard the foam and the pulsating sound of the flowing alcohol.

“Kaku, we have work at IAI after we eat, remember? Don’t you have to drive your motorcycle?”

“We’ve probably got the night watch. I’ll be sober enough by then.”

“Right, right. Izumo-kun’s a real man. A young guy’s glycogen has to be able to handle that much. But I won’t lose! Mama, bring papa a beer too! I’ll do my best!”

Kazami’s mother immediately pulled out a five liter beer she had waiting below the table.

It made a deep sound as she placed it on the table and she spoke to her husband.

“I want to see a little of what you can do, papa.”

“Ha ha ha. A little of what I can do? Is this only ‘a little’, mama?”

She next pulled out a fifteen liter beer she had waiting below the table.

The sound it made when it was placed on the table was more or less an impact and she spoke to her husband again.

“I want to see a lot of what you can do, papa.”

“Dad, I think you should hurry up and admit defeat.”

“Oh? But Chisato, he can easily handle this. When he married me, he drank my papa under the table. And you know my papa is from a

very influential family, right?"

Kazami silently swore she would never ask for details about that.

She noticed the foam rising to the top of Izumo's glass, so she quickly stopped pouring and sighed quietly enough that no one else could hear. She decided to change the subject both to be considerate and to save her father.

"By the way, what's your next job, dad?"

"Well, while working on the Christmas concert, I'm thinking about doing a Christmas TV special. Since it'll be the end of the year, we can have a debate about the more unfortunate. It'll be called 'Why Are They Still Alive? – A Discussion on Unmarried and Unemployed Men in their Thirties'."

"Sorry, but I think you're taking the word 'unfortunate' in a dangerous direction there."

"Hmm." He brought a hand to his forehead. "Are you still too young for that one? O-oh, I forgot to mention. I'm also working on some educational history anime for the December theatre. There's 'Dr. Guillotine's Invention', 'Fight, Mr. Gatling!', and because it'll be Christmas 'Santa Claus Loves the Color Red'. All three are uncensored and full of great lines like 'Your ear is next!!' "

"Dad, did the pamphlet say those would leave the audience in tears? Just not in the way you would expect?"

"Ha ha ha. Of course. You may not remember, Chisato, but when you were little, I brought you to a historical theatre anime I helped produce. It was called 'Magical Girl Sta☆Lin' and it was about a magical girl who fought for everyone's equality."

"Did you? …That title definitely stands out."

"Yes, and just like in history, she purges her magical nation and dies alone. You were really sad and wouldn't stop crying, but were you so sad that you forgot all about it?"

"I'm pretty sure I was suppressing the trauma!!"

She shouted back, but her mother brought a finger to her own nose.

"Chisato, you'll disturb the neighbors."

"Oh, sorry."

"When the stress builds up in your heart, let it out by consulting someone, not with anger. Okay?"

Kazami nodded and lowered her head with the beer can in her

hands. She also glanced over at Izumo.

…Why is he so focused on eating the croquettes?

She noticed her father had had begun attacking the croquettes now that he was freed from that hell of beer and Izumo was apparently competing with him.

Seeing that, she brought the can to her lips.

She tilted the can and then tilted her head back to chug the contents. She told herself she would wait until after she finished drinking before deciding whether to talk about it or not.

There was a lot she had to say, but one was the most important.

…Sayama's selfish announcement about Team Leviathan disbanding.

She could not tell her parents about UCAT, but she could alter it to be about where she worked part-time. Or she could make it be about her band or a group like that.

While thinking, she audibly gulped down the alcohol and heard her father speak.

"Izumo-kun, did something happen to Chisato recently?"

"It seems like it, dad. I think she's feeling hesitant about marrying me."

She was shocked by what they said, how politely they said it, how they addressed each other, and the tone they said it in. She expressed that shock by slamming the can down on the table while almost choking.

"Wh-what kind of nonsense are you talking about, Kaku!?"

"It's coming out your nose, Chisato."

She frantically grabbed a tissue from the table and blew her nose. Meanwhile, her mother brought a hand to her cheek.

"I'm sorry, Izumo-kun. Chisato has a hard time coming out and saying things."

"I know, mom. She always uses her fists before her words."

She gave a demonstration.

But after knocking him away, she realized that put their household belongings in danger, so she immediately grabbed his collar and pulled him back.

"W-wait just a second, Kaku!"

"I-I will if you will."

"Just listen to me."

He smiled as she held his collar.

"Oh? You have something to say? Fine. Speak, Chisato."

Ah, she thought when she heard that.

…He tricked me into this.

"Fine then," she said while facing forward.

There, she found her parents leaning forward with their heads resting in their hands.

"Y-you don't have to wait so expectantly."

"But it makes me feel a little happy and a little sad to see the two of you fighting like a married couple already."

"I'd like it of you showed a little more sadness," said Izumo. "Especially toward me."

Her father ignored him.

"How long has it been since Chisato consulted us about something instead of just asking questions? Has it been since that middle school cooking class where her food numbed the other girls in her group and they buried her up to her neck in the sandbox?"

"That was when she started practicing how to cook, wasn't it?"

She was annoyed that they remembered that, but Izumo looked oddly happy as he listened. She had no idea how to react to the ticklish feeling that sight gave her, but she still decided to speak.

"Um, at work…"

"Is your boss being mean to you, Chisato!? Now I'm mad! I'll hijack tomorrow's TV special debate and retitle it "24 Hours of Observing and Mocking My Daughter's Mean Boss'! …Gah!"

She was slow to throw the plate, so he managed to say a fair bit.

She told herself to be quicker next time.

"We had created a group to make our work easier. We had just gotten some good new members and it looked like we could really get some work done, but then the guy at the center of the group suddenly said we should disband. …And our work is just about to get a lot busier too."

"So were you wondering why you should disband when you have so much work ahead of you and you have all the people you need? Is that it, Chisato?"

Her mother gave a small smile as she asked and Kazami nodded.

Unsure what to do, she began using her chopsticks to chop up the croquettes that were soaking in the sauce.

"After ordering us to disband, he named me as the leader for the time being. …But in his mind, we really have disbanded. And yet we'd gathered the best people for the job."

She gave a sigh that almost sounded like a laugh and she gave an exaggerated shrug.

"If there's something we're doing wrong, we can fix it, but he didn't give us anything like that. We don't know the reason behind this at all, but he doesn't seem to care. …Then what did he think of those of us who had gathered together for our job? Does he think we're so lacking that we couldn't even understand his reasoning?"

"Well, what are your coworkers to you, Chisato?"

"Well… I can trust them, they're skilled, they use all of that skill, and they're fun to be around." She hesitated. "So even if some things were painful or troubling, I put up with it. …I put a lot of effort into this."

"But it sounds like it was different for him."

Her mother's words rang clear in her ears and she raised the head she had lowered at some point.

She saw the usual small smile and that smile opened to speak.

"You can't accept it, can you? You worked so hard and you gathered plenty of people and strength to work with you, but it was all brushed aside as worthless and you weren't even given a reason. All your efforts to help that leader were treated as worthless."

Kazami simply nodded, but then she felt that was not enough.

"All this time, we had…"

While speaking, she recalled everything since meeting Izumo and joining UCAT.

She had gained G-Sp2, she had completed several missions, and she had eventually been placed in Team Leviathan. She had then shot the werewolf in that Okutama forest to save Shinjou and Sayama and that had led to the present.

…Why am I working such a dangerous job?

She had wondered that countless times, but she had been trying to ensure she never had to do so again.

…After all, only I can do this.

She had worked to make sure she could say that, she had nearly died several times, and she had also saved lives.

Then she had gained teammates. She had even saved Sayama in

that forest.

But for some reason, he had ordered them to disband.

Despite knowing how dangerous it was, he had chosen to act alone instead of working with the others.

It felt like he was saying their strength, efforts, and everything else were meaningless.

“Why won’t people recognize all the effort you’ve put into some things. Our job had just gotten to be so much fun, too. Am I really that useless?”

At the very end, Sayama had said to look into their pasts to find the reason for the disbanding.

But they all had different pasts. Sayama and the others would investigate their pasts by following in the footsteps of their parents who had been in UCAT, but Kazami was a normal person with none of that. She had no relatives with a connection to UCAT, so her connection had first appeared during the attack by 6th and 10th two years ago.

…He isn’t saying everyone can stay but me, is he?

Was he saying the rest of the fight would be too hard without a past giving her a reason to fight?

“What is he thinking? Was I just being patronizing? Should I have stuck with a dry attitude?”

While muttering her worried questions, she realized how timid she was being.

She looked up and found her parents quietly looking her way.

She had a feeling she only spoke because she could not stand their silent gazes and she knew she was complaining more than consulting with them, but she quickly spoke up regardless.

“Wh-what am I supposed to do at times like this? Do you know?”

“Well,” began her father before pausing. “There’s not much you can do, so just do whatever you want.”

“Eh?”

Her father placed a croquette on his plate.

“This is your problem, so if you don’t know what you should do, how can we? But if you have some kind of idea, we’ll support you even if it seems hopeless. Unfortunately, you don’t seem to have any ideas. …That’s what’s happening here, Chisato. You still haven’t reached the same place where he suggested you disband.”

“I haven’t reached the same place as him?”

“Right. He has an idea, but you have nothing to oppose that idea. Simple, isn’t it? If you had an idea to oppose his decision to disband, you would be able to understand why he made that decision and you could find a way to solve this. And…” He split the croquette. “Whether you can understand his reasoning is entirely up to what you hold inside you. It depends on whether the answer exists inside you as a past experience.”

“You sound a lot like him.”

“Really? Then he must be an amazingly cool, gentlemanly, smart, and wonderful person!”

“Kyah! Papa, you’re unbelievably overconfident!”

“Ha ha ha. Just unbelievably leave it to me, mama! Your croquettes are so lovely that-…”

His words came to a sudden stop when he placed the croquette in his mouth. He also stopped moving.

His frozen expression gradually grew pale and then red. The woman sitting next to him began clapping.

“Papa just got tonight’s winner! Too bad, Izumo-kun.”

“Dammit, I’ll make sure I win next time!!”

“U-um, mom, dad? We were kind of having an important discussion here. So, uh, does this family have a rule that absolutely everything must end on a joke?”

As soon as she asked, her father shot to his feet and ran from the table.

Izumo tilted his head and grabbed a safe croquette but still made sure to split it open and check what was inside.

“What was in that one?”

“I copied what Chisato made during her middle school cooking class. Has she ever made it for you, Izumo-kun?”

Izumo slowly turned a glare in Kazami’s direction.

“Chisato, you don’t need to go digging through too many of your past experiences. I think the latest version of you is the best.”

“You don’t have to choose your words so carefully!!”

●

Mikoku did not hold back.

She understood how inexperienced she was in combat, so she did

not have room to hold back.

She immediately went all out.

She leaped through the center of the explosion and wind that blew through the factory entrance and she pulled her Japanese sword from its scabbard.

She launched herself from the dark factory and into the dark night.

The night air reached her skin and the bitter-smelling smoke enveloping her was swept away.

The yard was quite large.

…And the enemy is…

She found them.

"!"

Someone in white stood in the center of the one hundred square meter clearing.

She first thought it was a UCAT armored uniform, but it was simply a white combat coat.

A woman wore the white outfit.

She was tall and well-built and a long braid of brown hair dropped down along her back. Mikoku judged her to be in her late forties.

To make herself hard to target, Mikoku ran along a gouging arc to circle in from the right.

"Who the hell are you!?"

"Do you really think a woman is going to answer to that?"

The woman swung both arms up and forward and something came from her sleeves.

"Handguns!?"

"What a boring idea. Now I want to hear you cry."

The objects that came from her sleeves resembled hammers.

Attached at the ends of the white-painted metal staffs were fifteen centimeter cylindrical warheads made of white metal.

Mikoku gasped as she charged in.

"Panzerfausts!?"

"They're for more general use than that sword of yours. They were made so even women and children could use them."

The woman pressed the firing switch on the staff portion.

A jet of smoke must have shot from the other end hidden up her sleeves because her coat swelled out. At the same time, Mikoku

heard the warheads launch.

After a bursting sound, she saw the two warheads fly toward her from only two meters away. The two explosives flew quickly while trailing a clockwise spiral of white smoke.

“…!”

It was so sudden that she missed her time to evade.

The two warheads spiraled as they approached, so she could not move in between them.

If she focused on one, she would be able to avoid just that one, but that would leave her in the path of the other one. And so she continued running.

“…”

She did not hesitate.

She moved to avoid the one arriving on the right. As soon as she evaded it, the clockwise spiral path of the left one would bring it right into her gut from the lower left.

She knew that, so she only just barely avoided the right one. It whizzed right past her ear.

But if she had not made such a tight evasion, she would have fully exposed her to the other shot.

Meanwhile, the left one arrived.

Its clockwise spiral sent it toward her from the lower left, but she took action.

She took a step forward and toward the warhead.

She made the step with her left foot and it turned her to the side.

She immediately moved her sword to her left hand and held the back of the sword forward.

“…!”

She swung the sword as if scooping something up from below.

With a crash of metal, her blade tip struck the bottom surface of the flying warhead.

She used the curve of the blade’s back to scoop it upward.

“Kh!”

To keep the spiral trajectory going, she rotated the warhead with the back of the blade pressed against it.

She rotated her entire body, felt the weight and momentum of the warhead in the tip of the blade, and changed its direction without interrupting its proper motion.

After a single rotation, she looked like an athlete performing the hammer throw.

“This New Year’s gift is a little early, but take it!”

She used her sword in place of a ballista and threw the warhead back at the woman in white.

It flew toward the woman with its initial acceleration and the centrifugal force of its rotation still intact.

A moment later, the warhead Mikoku had avoided landed and exploded behind her.

The blast, noise, and light rushed past her and supported her forward acceleration.

And while launching herself forward, she saw the woman swing her arms down.

More weapons came from her sleeves.

This time, they really were guns.

But these were white-painted heavy machineguns that were two-thirds her own height.

…What!?

Mikoku was less surprised by the appearance of the guns than she was by something else. The explosive warhead was still flying toward the woman after she had thrown it back, but the woman smiled and held the heavy machineguns beneath her arms.

“…”

It hit.

The blast was more like a collision of wind than an actual explosion. After the first explosion behind Mikoku, the blast from near the woman’s chest struck her from the front.

With the sound of tearing paper, Mikoku’s cheek split open. The air had struck her with enough force to create a vacuum. She also felt chilly tearing on a few other parts of her skin, but she did not care.

She saw the red flames and the smoke swell into the sky.

The sound of the explosion seemed to belatedly race across the world.

An instant later, Mikoku visually confirmed that her opponent was still alive.

“How?”

Despite her question, the truth before her eyes said it all.

The woman in a white combat coat took a step toward her as if casting off the black smoke.

The woman was completely unharmed.

Her hair, face, smiling teeth, and expression were untouched. Not a hint of soot could be found on her clothes.

Her weapons were the same. The two muzzles were unharmed and facing Mikoku while the woman pulled their triggers.

The lingering notes of the explosion vanished into the sky along with the smoke.

A moment later, Mikoku realized her right arm was gone.

She felt no pain, but she did feel heat in her shoulder. The impact shook the core of her body more than her shoulder and the word "reverberation" entered her mind.

Still, she forced herself to keep running. If she ran normally, the reverberation in her body would pull her down and more of her body would be lost, so she leaped leftward with all her might.

The sound of the gunfire arrived afterwards and it quickly swept in from the right without waiting.

"…!"

Before she had even finished her jump, Mikoku kicked off the ground and ran.

She sent the sand of the clearing flying backwards as she raced onward.

On the second step, she could tell something was spilling from her right shoulder and that part of her body grew cold.

She could not stop the strength from leaving her.

…But what kind of defense is this woman using!?

If it was concept protection, it was quite powerful. After all, her warhead had destroyed the factory's door which had its own concept protection. So if she was unharmed by the same blast…

"Are you some kind of monster!?"

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm a god." The woman turned toward Mikoku with a smile. "All of my power is divine. Remember that, little girl. I am armed with God Panzerfausts and God Machineguns. Also…"

She tossed aside the machinegun in her right hand to switch weapons.

That was the perfect opportunity.

Mikoku's sword had a concept applied for the coming battle with UCAT. It was a refined version of the popular "slice and pierce" concept and it was made to cut through the gaps in defense concepts.

This opponent's defense concept had withstood that explosion, so it could fully defend against a force radiated across an entire surface.

But how could it handle strikes to a single point?

The opponent would be defenseless while switching weapons.

…And if she has absolute confidence in her defense, she will let her guard down!

The difference between confidence and negligence was paper thin, so Mikoku charged in to transform the woman's confidence into negligence.

She moved forward.

Her missing right arm affected her balance and swinging her entire body to swing her left arm and sword could easily destroy that balance.

That was why she went for a direct jab by swinging her left half forward.

She targeted the spot where the defense concept field would be weakest. That was not the gaps in movable parts that normal armor had. Concepts had no thickness, so they were distributed evenly without folds. However, she still knew one place where it would be weaker.

…The center of the chest where it already activated!!

The woman's warhead was made to destroy defense concepts, so her own defense concept would have been annihilated by the blast.

That was why Mikoku charged in.

She stepped forward in the instant the woman swung down her arm and launched her attack just as the woman raised her arm again.

She threw her left leg forward.

As soon as she landed, she rotated her heel outward to rotate and build up momentum.

As if extending her bent left elbow, she sent the sword tip in to the center of the woman's chest.

Its path was an almost perfectly straight line.

"!!"

The timing of the attack could not have been better.

And an instant later, she saw the blade shatter.

"…!?"

As soon as it touched the woman's white coat, it broke with the sound of shattering glass.

Cracks did not even have time to form. It immediately shattered all the way to the base.

…Why?

Her questioning eyes stared at the sword that was now only a hilt.

The sword's guard shook and then fell from the end of the hilt.

But Mikoku did not watch it fall.

The woman in front of her raised her right arm as if to scratch her own face.

She went on to reach into her back collar and pulled out a weapon.

It was a shoulder-fired anti-tank rocket launcher.

"I apologize for that other one. It was pretty old. Would this suit a modern girl better? I studied this world to create this God Anti-Tank Rocket. Nice, isn't it?"

The rifle-like object had a thin diamond-shaped warhead on the end.

Mikoku saw it press against her chest. She felt its cold surface and its weight.

"Some people in black attacked Izumo UCAT today. Was that you!?"

"Attackers in black? Don't know anything about that. What kind of idiot would do that? …Just to clear your suspicion, I'll tell you who I am. I'm a god of 10th-Gear. You can call me 'Betrayed Expectations' Jord. I accepted an invitation from Hajji, so I'm here to help the Army. But once I set off some fireworks for my welcoming party, some idiot ran out and attacked me."

"Your welcoming party!?" shouted Mikoku. "Why would you attack us like that!?"

"You don't know?" replied the woman named Jord. "It's the end of October, so it's time for the 'Beat or Treat' festival. Happy Halloween and all that. Then again, it's my first time taking part."

Mikoku heard a voice.

“You’re a girl, aren’t you? Then wear something more appropriate to the occasion.”

What she experienced next was not defeat. She experienced having her entire body blown to pieces.

Chapter 5

“Feeling of Separation”

When they do not know where someone is going
Those who do not want to go anywhere
Will ask them

●

From waist height up, a small room was surrounded by a transparent windshield.

The room was a cockpit and a boy sat in the long forward seat.

He had reddish-brown skin, unkempt hair, and a black work outfit.

When he touched the console indicator, it displayed several waves.

“Can you match it, Harakawa?” asked a voice.

“Yes, leave just the ones around here, Thunder Fellow.”

Harakawa touched one of the waves and all of those without similar amplitudes vanished

The display zoomed in and all of the waves approached a central wave.

“It’s like a radio,” said a girl’s voice behind him.

He turned around and found a girl in a blue armored uniform. She was getting up from the secondary seat and held a compact vacuum cleaner.

When he saw her smile and shake her short blonde hair, he only nodded.

“We’re trying to match the communicator to Low-Gear. …First, remove the ones with concept readings.”

“Understood,” said Thunder Fellow.

The waves overlapped and Harakawa heard a new voice.

“…kawa-san, can you hear me!? Honestly, do you have any idea how indecent it is to be closed inside a transparent room with a girl? I’m so happy to have such an indecent upperclassman!”

“Are you stupid, Hiba? No, wait. You are stupid, Hiba. …Heo Thunderson, don’t you start blushing.”

He turned toward Heo who returned to cleaning the secondary seat with a troubled look.

Harakawa averted his gaze to look out the windshield.

There, he found a dark space.

It was a storage room and hangar for a variety of equipment located on Japanese UCAT’s fifth basement. The area had been left open ever since American UCAT’s attack, so the different departments were using it for storage and emergency work. It was

also used for some large concept weapon experiments.

The thirty meter blue and white mechanical dragon named Thunder Fellow stood in the center of that floor and Harakawa sat inside the cockpit located in his head.

Heo had called in Thunder Fellow so they could check over his different parts.

After the attack on Izumo UCAT, Harakawa and Hiba had brought Heo and Mikage to Japanese UCAT. They were there as guards and also because they felt it was best for Team Leviathan to stick together.

It was currently eight at night, but Kazami and Izumo would soon be arriving for the next shift. After that, they planned to spend the night at Hiba's grandfather's dojo.

…That way we can rush here if anything does happen.

They would also avoid putting themselves in danger by acting alone.

It had been Kazami's idea. She had wanted to be as cautious as they could in case of a possible attack.

…It almost feels like she's doing it out of spite over Sayama's decision.

Harakawa wondered what would happen.

…I just don't understand why Sayama ordered us to disband or why the treasurer is so mad.

He had joined Team Leviathan a month ago but had not taken part in a single battle since. Nor had he undergone any large-scale training.

That left him unable to feel uneasy or hopeful about the current situation.

Heo on the other hand seemed overly hopeful about having teammates for the first time.

Having the word "disband" thrown in the face of that hope seemed to have shaken her, but Sayama's comment about searching for their pasts also seemed to have motivated her.

On the way here, she had clearly wanted to say something.

Mostly likely, she wanted to ask what Sayama had meant and whether Harakawa would help her search for her past, but she had not managed to get the words out.

"But what do I do if she does say it."

“Eh? D-did you just say something?”

“No. It isn’t my problem, Heo Thunderson.”

Serious people always get the short end of the stick, he silently complained. *Sometime soon, she’ll probably clench her fists in anger and ask if I’m seriously thinking about my past. And at the same time, she’ll have already decided for herself whether I am or not.*

In Harakawa’s case, his “past” was his father.

He thought about that father while messing with the instruments.

…He was a sniper, so he must not have ever messed with a mechanical dragon like this.

He had heard his father had died after being sent by the US military to assist with the Great Kansai Earthquake. He had always thought the man had done something unnecessary and gotten himself killed without a single thought for his family, but according to the past Sayama had seen, some kind of battle had occurred in Osaka.

…And my mom must have been there too.

He had not told her about his job at UCAT and he had not asked her to explain why she knew about UCAT.

She was still hiding UCAT’s existence and he was unsure whether he should bring it up or not. Heo must have realized how he was feeling because she had not asked his mother either.

But based on what Sayama had said, he was certain his mother was hiding something about his father’s death.

Would she tell him the truth if he asked?

And would learning that help him learn why Team Leviathan should disband?

While wondering that, he quickly checked on his surroundings.

A black giant stood to the left. Even as a giant, it was only as tall as Thunder Fellow’s shoulders, but it was seven or eight times the height of the boy standing at its feet.

The boy was Hiba and he had a cellphone to his ear.

“Sounds like it’s getting through, Harakawa-san. Is it for you, Mikage-san?”

The black giant standing next to him nodded and raised its right hand with a creaking movement.

“Yes. I can hear him.”

Harakawa looked up at the black giant looking down at Hiba.

“She can use it without you?”

“She can a little bit now and she might be able to use it even more later. Also, Susamikado evolves whenever she does, so by the time she can use it on her own…”

“Susamikado and I might be able to move even more than now.”

The hint of joy in Mikage’s voice told Harakawa something.

…They’re really strong.

He then grabbed the roll bars on either side of his seat.

“How about doing some movement tests?”

As the technician replied, Harakawa moved the machine. He had been designated as Thunder Fellow’s pilot, but he did not often have a chance to pilot him outside of battle. Heo was not combined with Thunder Fellow, so he could perform a low level test of the machine’s intrinsic movements.

He heard a slight mechanical sound as he tilted Thunder Fellow to the left.

Urged on by his silent surroundings, he spoke.

“Come to think of it, Sayama and Shinjou should be arriving at the station about now.”

Heo was closer, but Hiba was the one to reply.

“Yes, they were travelling on foot, so they should be getting there about now if you include some preparation time in their dorm room. I just hope they aren’t attacked.”

“They’re going to the Okutama mountains and Sakai. I doubt they’ll be attacked in either place, Hiba. More importantly, do you know why Sayama said Team Leviathan should disband?”

“No, not at all. He might think we’re lacking. He’s so skilled himself that we might be falling behind in his eyes.”

“That makes a surprising amount of sense,” muttered Harakawa. “I see you also view this differently from our angry treasurer.”

“Well,” said Hiba while scratching his head. “That’s because we think about things differently. Personally, I’ll probably always think I have room to improve.”

“I see,” muttered Harakawa. “So everyone’s different.”

He moved his hands across the console to rearrange Thunder Fellow’s motors.

“That’s something I don’t understand. I guess Heo wouldn’t

either. We've only been a part of this for a month and that isn't enough time to know how powerful we are or how much we can do."

"Harakawa-san, I think you and Heo-san are the most powerful members of the group."

"I've never fought an official battle with the rest of you, but do you understand my situation, Hiba? Thunder Fellow's power was left with Heo. I'm just the hired driver, so I don't feel at all powerful."

"Are you okay with Harakawa just being someone you hired, Heo?" asked Mikage's voice.

Harakawa clicked his tongue in his heart. Working in a group was a pain because it required a lot of corrections to his standard policies.

But at the same time, he had a feeling Mikage's question got right to the heart of the issue, so he looked over his shoulder.

He wanted to see the expression of the girl cleaning the secondary seat.

However…

"?"

He could not see her because the back of his seat was in the way.

He lifted himself and almost wrapped his arms around the seat to see her.

"Why are you lying down, Heo Thunderson?"

"Ah…"

She gave a weak voice while bent in half. Her right arm held her stomach, her left arm was held between her thighs, her face was dyed scarlet, and her breathing was rough.

"Do you have a fever, Heo Thunderson?"

"According to my thermal vision, she does," cut in Mikage's voice.

"No, um, uh…"

"Are you okay?" asked Harakawa while leaning over toward the secondary seat. As he did so, he stuck a hand on the seat's right console.

"Hyahn!!"

Heo twitched and beads of sweat fell from her skin.

"?"

Harakawa quickly removed his hand from the console and heard Thunder Fellow speak.

"As time has passed since I was summoned, my synchronization with Heo has risen."

"In other words, when I touch the controls to move you…"

He frowned and Heo answered while panting.

"I-it feels like you're touching my stomach or-… When you use the power output system, it feels like you're gently stirring me up below my navel. B-but I know you wouldn't do anything bad, so…um…"

She sounded troubled.

"I thought I would just put up with it."

"What are you talking about, Heo Thunderson? Stop putting up with it and begin the combination."

"W-wait a minute! You're mixing her up inside her stomach and forcing her to combine! What are you two doing in there!?"

"Shut up, Hiba."

Harakawa scratched his head and sighed.

"Honestly, we just can't seem to settle down without Sayama and the others. Are we going to have to look into our pasts after all?"

●

Sayama stood in a nighttime train station.

It was a transfer station with four platforms stretching east to west. Its name was JR Haijima Station.

He stood between the platforms second and third tracks.

He was next to the barrier surrounding the stairway leading underground.

The barrier was waist height and a white cup sat on it. The cup held a special drink.

…Hot Eround Tea Z.

He crossed the arms of his gray mountain-climbing suit, nodded, and looked up.

Baku was not on his head like usual. After announcing the temporary disbanding of Team Leviathan, the creature had been returned to UCAT.

He had probably been left with Ooshiro.

Sayama himself would soon be in the mountains of Okutama.

…But this means a long time away from Shinjou-kun.

It would normally be a two day trip, but it would actually come out to three days because he was leaving at night.

For him, it felt like a final farewell.

Haijima Station's second and third platforms were both divided between an upper and lower platform. One line led to Oume and Okutama and the other to Tachikawa and Tokyo. Both of their trains would arrive in a few minutes and they would have to say goodbye.

Shinjou was currently changing in the bathroom.

A number of ideas had occurred to him about that, but he had decided not to do anything.

Doing anything would take time and he did not want Shinjou to miss her train.

That was the situation this time, at least. Next time could be a different story.

He had to resist now. They would do it next time. He was certain of it.

…I will let this desire build up inside me.

He nodded and felt unsatisfied by the lack of weight on his head.

He then turned to the Eround Tea Z.

It was for Shinjou. He felt it was a cheap item for a farewell gift, but nothing could have been more appropriate.

…Simply wonderful.

He gave a few satisfied nods at his own thoughts but then had another thought.

He would be away from Shinjou for about two days.

Could he really spend their last moments together with only vending machine tea?

He brought a finger to his forehead, thought for about three seconds, and reached a conclusion.

"Adding a few drugs should help."

He pulled out three white pills that Ryouko had given him. They were secret Tamiya family drugs and the old-fashioned pills had a plum blossom symbol on them. He lined them up from left to right in his palm.

"A drug that makes you lewd, a drug that builds up mental excitement, and a drug that makes you honest to yourself."

Ryouko had said they would "give Setsu-chan everything he needs", but Sayama was not so sure. Regardless, he put the pills in the tea and slightly shook the cup.

He saw no change in the tea's color, just as Ryouko had promised,

and he wondered if they were for her work.

He was impressed by the Tamiya family's skill.

"Sayama-kun, what are you doing?"

He turned toward Shinjou's voice.

She wore a rucksack on her back, Sadame's hairstyle, a jacket, and chinos.

Noting that her outfit's color scheme was brown, he reached for the paper cup.

"Shinjou-kun, have some-…"

"Oh, I already bought my own."

She showed him what she held in her hands.

She had a paper cup in each hand and she held out the left one with a smile.

"Here, thanks for waiting for me. This one's for you. You like coffee, right?"

Sayama looked at the cup next to him and the one in Shinjou's hand.

Shinjou also looked at the two cups, frowned, and tilted her head.

"Will you drink mine?"

He nodded, but Shinjou tilted her head again.

She used her chin to indicate the tea next to him.

"Then what about that?"

"Won't you drink it, Shinjou-kun? I bought this tea for you."

"Eh? Oh, that's that IAI tea, isn't it? Heh heh. …In that case, you can drink it."

"No, it was made especially for you."

"Really? Heh heh. Why was a tea made especially for me without anyone telling me?"

"Ha ha ha. To surprise you of course."

"Ha ha. I see. …Well, it was definitely a surprise!!! I'm just glad you didn't use my photo!"

"Of course not. While I want to give you a public debut, I could hardly bear to have you defiled by the gazes of the masses. …Now, how about a drink, Shinjou-kun?"

She sighed and held up the cup in her left hand.

"Sorry, but I'm already drinking the cocoa I got for myself."

"Why not trade for my tea?"

"Why?" she asked with an emotionless smile. "I thought you didn't

like cocoa."

…I need a reason.

It came to him in a flash of insight.

"I want to drink something you already drank from."

"Stop recreating something straight out of a sad elementary school memory!!"

She pulled back the hand holding the coffee.

"Honestly, I won't give you this until you drink that tea."

I cannot have that, thought Sayama as he reflexively drank the tea.

Only after setting down the cup did a certain thought occur to him.

…Was it safe for me to drink that?

As he pondered that, Shinjou held out the coffee with a troubled look.

"Here. …And I feel a little bad about wasting your considerate offer."

"That is nothing to worry about, Shinjou-kun. After all, you put the money in the vending machine and pulled this coffee out by hand. It is sure to taste far better than my tea."

"Is there something wrong with your brain?"

Hearing that, he thought back on what he had said. He detected nothing strange about the logic, tone, or ideas behind his words, but it was possible he could no longer judge his own behavior due to the drugs.

That was why he asked a certain question.

"Shinjou-kun, it is possible there is something strange about me right now. What do you think?"

"I don't really see anything different from normal. …Isn't this your usual pace?"

"No, Shinjou-kun. Please give this serious thought. Right now, I should be… Lewd! Mentally excited! And honest to myself!!"

"How is that any different from normal?"

"Heh heh heh. It is all much more intense than normal."

"Right, right." She nodded with a smile. "Listen, Sayama-kun. When the original values are infinite, there's no way to measure an increase."

"Hm, someone with infinite lewdness, excitement, and self-

honesty? What a troublesome person.”

“They really are. …And I’m talking about you!!”

Hearing that, Sayama checked who she was shouting at.

The shout travelled through him and to the office worker sitting on a platform bench behind him. The middle-aged man in a suit was focused on a red handheld game system as he waited for a train in the chilly air.

The sounds suggested he was playing a popular puzzle game. It was a former Soviet game where blocks representing rebels fell down and piled up. When the space was filled with no gaps remaining, the blocks were considered captured and thus vanished. The most points were earned by leaving a vertical gap open and sending a long red block into it. The game was said to include dangerous ideas and it often interfered with people’s work or education.

…So he is the infinite man.

People are not always what they seem, accepted Sayama before turning back to Shinjou.

She was glaring at him, but he changed the subject.

“Now, the trains should be arriving soon. It is a shame we have to part ways for so long. I will be praying for your safe return from Sakai.”

When she heard that, she lowered her eyebrows and smiled.

“My safe return? You’re making too big a deal of this.”

“After that attack today, we cannot let our guard down. It is entirely possible we will be attacked.”

She gasped and he took a sip of the coffee.

“Delicious. I can feel the touch of your skin. I wonder what beans they used.”

“I only remember it was an IAI brand and it said ‘Mito-made Ground Beans’,” she answered. “Anyway, I should only have to rely on the municipal office, but what about you? You’re heading into the mountains at night.”

“I have been everywhere a few hours into the mountains of Okutama as part of the Hiba dojo’s nighttime training, but my destination is even further in than that. If I entered the mountains during the day, night would have fallen by the time I reached unfamiliar territory.”

And…

"#8-kun has determined the location of Professor Kinugasa's home based on the report photograph we found in Izumo UCAT. Using that, I can ensure I will return safely, Shinjou-kun. I always try to choose the best possible method."

"Oh, right… I know you try to do that." She lowered her head while holding her paper cup in both hands. "But I'm still worried. You might not be able to find Professor Kinugasa's house and even if you do get there…"

"I will be following in my father's footsteps. But do not worry about my chest pains. Leaving you puts me in the same position as before I met you. I am very fortunate to have you with me, but I will now return to my normal self without you. That is all this means."

He smiled bitterly.

"Even so, my wonderful memories contain my life with you and how you have helped me. I will likely desire that fortune to help with more than just the chest pains. I will yearn for it when I eat, sleep, or am feeling bored."

"You casually say some really embarrassing things."

She let out a relaxing and far from unhappy sigh.

They then heard a train beginning to move. It was the one they had arrived on which had been stopped on the first track. It was preparing to return to Itsukaichi and Akigawa.

The Itsukaichi Line connected to the Oume line coming from Tachikawa and its departure meant one thing.

"Our trains will be here soon, Sayama-kun. But…um…this may be sudden…"

She leaned back as if placing her rucksack on the stairway barrier.

"I think you should apologize to Kazami-san and the others when we get back. I don't think they have the slightest clue why you're trying to have Team Leviathan disband."

"Why should I apologize?"

Shinjou gave a meaningless nod while looking to the third track.

She took some time to carefully choose her words.

"You said to search for our pasts. In my case, I think that's linked with Shinjou Yukio. With the others, that probably means pursuing the truth of the Great Kansai Earthquake that we saw in that dream

of the past." She kept her eyes on the third track's platform. "But Kazami-san doesn't have any connections to the past. That's why what you said might be a little mean to her."

"And so I should apologize for giving her a riddle she cannot solve? Is that what you are trying to say?"

He nodded.

"I see. If she, you, and the others still do not have the answer once I return, I will make a decision."

"A decision?"

He immediately answered her.

"It is a simple matter. Anyone who does not have the answer will be removed from the Leviathan Road. That is all."

●

Shinjou's eyes opened in surprise at Sayama's declaration.

However, he calmly looked directly at her.

"Do not worry. I am certain you will understand."

"B-but…that's way too sudden!"

"That is why I did not reveal this back in the Kinugasa Library. It would only have brought suspicion and distrust."

He reached a hand toward her shoulder, pulled her toward him, looked up a bit, and pointed to the distant stars in the sky.

"Even if I am not very persuasive, what I am about to say is very meaningful, so please listen carefully."

"What is the point of that pose?"

"It is a meaningless yet persuasive pose, Shinjou-kun."

"You're already contradicting yourself, Sayama-kun!"

"Calm down," he said. "Now, are you listening? I told everyone to think about why we should disband, but to be honest, that is a riddle for myself as well. …I will also be searching for my past. To find out how we ended up in this situation, I will be pursuing the father I would rather not know about."

So…

"If I return from Okutama and was unable to pursue my own past, I will be forced to accept that I am lacking."

"!?"

Shinjou gasped, looked at him, and frantically spoke up.

"I-is the reason for disbanding that important for us?"

“It is. It is very important for our future. And that is why I have a request. …Listen, Shinjou-kun. I want you to find that reason and I want your help in reforming Team Leviathan.”

Her eyebrows shot up at the word “reforming”.

He was staring at her and she stared back.

“Sayama-kun. …Are you saying you don’t actually want us to disband? Are you actually focused on having us reform afterwards?”

He did not answer, his expression remained unchanged, and the silence continued.

They were finally interrupted by unwanted external movement.

They first heard noise from the second and third tracks and then headlights reached them.

In an instant, wind and countless lit windows intersected on the upper and lower tracks of the platform.

As soon as the wind intersected, Sayama grabbed her shoulders and turned her toward him.

She felt his lips on her forehead.

“We can continue from there after we return, Shinjou-kun. … Being patient now will make it even more exciting. And while you should be fine, I will leave you with one piece of my past.”

“A piece of your past?”

“Yes.” He pulled a white envelope from his pocket. “If you think you have found your answer in Osaka, look at this. It contains a fact about a certain individual that is a mystery even to me. Once you find your answer, you should be able to read what it says properly.”

“This is information on someone from your past, isn’t it?”

She nodded, took the letter, and looked strongly up at him.

“Testament. I hope I get to read it. I’ll do my best to make sure I can.”

She did not know what the letter said, but she could sense his trust. She felt she would come to understand something once she opened it and she nodded again to show her trust in that fact.

“Okay. I promise I’ll remember. When I find my past, I’ll read the past you’ve left with me. And…”

She looked at him with her eyebrows slightly raised. Her gaze met his sharp one and she poured her thoughts into her words.

“You make a promise too. Promise you’ll come back and see me again.”

“Why do you want me to promise that?”

“Well…” She lowered her head to hide the troubled look on her face. “It’s kind of pathetic, but…um… A long time ago, when I was still alone, Itaru-san told me someone would come for me someday. But my mom never showed up and neither did anyone else. I cried and cried, but I finally stopped once I realized the word ‘someday’ was just meant to comfort me.”

She forced a smile to feign cheerfulness and said one last thing.

“Make sure you come back, Sayama-kun.”

She clearly saw him nod and he even gave a slight smile as if telling her to calm down.

“Do not worry, Shinjou-kun. I will keep that promise and return to you. So…”

He grabbed her shoulders and turned her toward the train on the third track. He seemed to be telling her to leave.

She responded to that intention by nodding and starting to take her first step.

“Mh?”

But he suddenly gave a quiet groan.

What is it? she wondered while looking back.

She found him frowning.

“I apologize for interrupting this moment, Shinjou-kun, but something is bothering me.”

“Eh? Wh-what is it? You mean that envelope?”

After she turned toward him and tilted her head, he brought a hand to his chin and spoke in a heavy tone.

“Listen, Shinjou-kun. While you are away from me, you will find yourself in a certain situation for the first time.”

Just as she tried to ask what that was, the doors of the upper and lower trains opened and people poured out onto the platform, but Sayama continued regardless.

“Will you be able to check on your body without my help during both day and night!?”

He spoke quite loudly.

The other people waiting for the train, the people leaving the train, the office worker playing a handheld game, and the conductor leaving the conductor’s compartment all froze in place.

Motionless silence filled the entire station and everyone focused

on the two of them.

At the center of that silent focus, Shinjou was unsure which option to choose.

1: Hit him. → I have a feeling he would view it as skinship and enjoy it.

2: Run away. → He would probably chase after me shouting the same thing over and over again.

3: Give up. → Mankind must not submit to the unreasonable.

As her thoughts quickly heated up, he held out his hand.

That hand held a piece of paper.

“Here, Shinjou-kun. This is a photo of my speech during the general student meeting the other day. Taking hidden photos of yourself is a very difficult task. …This item was born from how superior you make me feel, but when you are working at a certain task during the day or night, feel free to use it if your imagination is not enough.”

He took a breath and patted her shoulder twice with a reassuring smile.

“Do not worry about me. I can get by just fine with my imagination.”

“If your imagination is that good, then don’t create these embarrassing situations!!!”

She chose Option 4: tighten the necktie in front of her as much as she could.

Chapter 6

“Resentment’s Beginning”

Howl and bite
Test the strength of your fangs
And…

●

Sound filled a lit room.

Eleven fairly solid tones came from the clock on the wall.

That sound reached the girl sitting in the large kotatsu at the center of the room.

She had long black hair, her upper body was lying on top of the kotatsu, and her eyes were closed.

She was asleep.

The television in front of her was turned off and its dark screen reflected her face.

Once the clock fell silent, only the girl's steady breathing could be heard.

That was when the blanket on another side of the futon rose and a dog exited.

The large white dog was almost a meter tall and he slowly crawled out from the kotatsu and circled around next to the girl.

He then barked.

His voice reverberated throughout the room and the girl frantically sat up.

"Kyah! Sh-Shiro! Don't bark. You'll disturb the neighbors."

She raised her eyebrows while scolding the dog and moved her left hand to hit him. However, he must have known she would not actually do so because he only stared at her hand as it stopped partway.

The dog did not move and she frowned at the motionless dog's expression.

"Did something happen?"

She strained her ears but could not hear anything.

She brought her left hand to her chest where a blue stone pendant and a red cloisonné pendant hung at her neck. She wrapped her fingers around them both and slowly stood.

The floor creaked a little below her feet.

The sound deepened her frown and she pressed a button on the TV remote sitting on the kotatsu.

Light raced across the black screen, color filled it, and sound came from it. The sound belonged to a late-night show.

"Now! It's once again time for the World Execution Show!!

Today's challenger is Incester Sisconsky who was arrested for his feelings toward his little sister! He's already warming up here in the Illinois Central Prison stage! Now, how are you feeling as you face 150 lashes with a metal whip while completely nude?"

"I'm gonna do my best!!"

"Okay, that's the spirit! If you can win here, our sponsor US-IAI will give you a year's supply of their new potable bath additive 'Dashi of Me'! Now, this is a good time for an ad break!!"

The girl had started nodding along, but the ad for the potable bath additive brought her back to her senses.

She quickly moved to the wall while using the loud TV to hide her footsteps.

A thick white coat hung on the wall.

It was for training. For the most part, it was entirely white, but the name Shino was sewn on the inside of the collar in orange.

She put her arms through the coat's sleeves and fastened the front.

"Shiro, come."

She opened the wood and glass door on the south side of the living room.

There she found a dark hallway and the entranceway beyond it.

…It's cold.

This space led outside and its air was cold and still.

Shiro stepped out into the hallway first as if to lead the way and protect her.

Slight cautious tension filled the dog's back.

…What is it?

Shino was alone in the house at the moment, but the fact that Mikoku was not here bothered her even more.

Mikoku would normally head out first, but she had gone to the factory tonight and she was not back yet. Hajji had apparently gone to get her, but he had not returned either.

…Maybe I should have gone too.

But she doubted she could have gone even if she had wanted to.

If she had, Mikoku would have said something.

Lately, Mikoku hated it whenever Shino was involved in the fighting.

It had started as warnings not to accept any of the Army's

missions, but it had lately shifted to scolding her about taking part in the following day's attack or even going to help prepare at the factory.

Mikoku was also trying to keep some distance between them.

…Why?

Shino guessed Mikoku was trying to say that she would protect her because fighting was her job.

She did think that was very like Mikoku, but…

…Why can't I take part in a fight that will influence the world I'll be a part of?

She had never asked that question.

She had a feeling Mikoku would be unable to answer if she did. Even if she knew the answer, she would be unable to give it. That answer was something very close to her true thoughts.

…And she has trouble being honest.

But that fear would vanish with the ending of the following day. Shino was one of the backup members for the attack. Mikoku had begged Hajji to change his mind, but Shino had done all her work just fine since summer, so there was no room for complaint.

"It'll be okay."

She muttered to herself in the dark hallway so both she and someone in her heart could hear.

"I can manage on my own."

She nodded and followed Shiro down the hall.

The word "chilly" seemed to gradually crawl up from the bottom of her feet.

Her feet did produce footsteps down the hall, but the television in the living room drowned them out.

"Now, it's time to introduce today's executioner! Let's see, he belongs to the Illinois Central Prison, he's ranked third in the World Execution League's heavyweight class, and he's gained the skill of a master in his thirty years of using the metal whip. Let's hear it for Markovic the Butcher!!"

After some cheers and entrance music, cries of Incester or Marko echoed from the audience. Out of the corner of her eye, Shino saw a shirtless macho man wearing a triangular black mask, but she reluctantly stepped entirely out into the hallway.

She walked the seven steps to the thick front door.

"…"

Shiro arrived ahead of her and raised his tail while lowering his head.

Shino stood behind as if hiding and focused her ears.

"Now, Markovic is going in for the attack! He attacks! He boldly attacks! He targets the crotch! The crotch! Three quick lashes to the crotch! And when the challenger shrinks back, he strikes the jaw from below! The challenger is completely on the defensive!!"

"Ahhhn! I-it hurts! But it feels so good!! Should I just go ahead and die!?"

She was curious about what was happening there, but she instead focused her ears on the door in front of her.

Someone was there.

She could not see anyone in the patterned glass to the side of the door, but she sensed a presence. Someone was hiding right behind the door.

The door did not have a peephole, but she could check on the intercom's LCD display that used the security camera below the entranceway roof. However, she did not want to create an opening by reaching for the intercom.

And so she asked a question instead.

"Who is it?"

Her voice filled the nighttime hallway and reached the door.

"It's me, it's me," immediately replied a voice. "It's me, it's me!!"

"I-if this is some kind of scam, I don't want any!!"

"Just open up. Are you going to leave a helper from 10th-Gear out in the cold autumn night?"

Shino then remembered that Hajji had said something about bringing back a guest before heading to the factory.

…But why would 10th help us?

And something else bothered her as well.

"Hajji isn't with you?"

"He said he had something to discuss with the factory manager and it isn't appropriate for a woman to hang around while men speak. Of course, that means us women need to turn our anger toward those men when we speak."

And…

"You're Shino, right? Open up. I'm carrying some pretty big

luggage right now.”

“Luggage?”

“It’s the girl named Mikoku. She’s stubborn, so I had to kill her about seventeen times. That must have exhausted her because she went right to sleep.”

Shino acted on reflex when she heard that. She ran past Shiro and to the door.

“You have Mikoku!?”

She opened the door to the night, but she did not find what she had expected.

Instead of the darkness of the night or the shadows of the neighborhood houses, she saw a large woman in a white coat and the muzzle of a gun.

The cold steel pressed against her forehead left her speechless.

“This is the end, Shino,” said the woman beyond the gun. “You are very kind, but that is exactly why this is the end. Remember this. On the battlefield, that kindness of yours will give you the final push toward death.”

The gun lightly pushed her and she took a cold and heavy step backwards.

Only then did she get a good look at the woman.

She was a large woman that Shino had to tilt her head back to see. Above her thick body and past her coat’s collar was the face of a hooked-nosed middle-aged woman. The woman’s blue eyes were turned toward Shino.

“Oh? You certainly look like a good girl. You are one, aren’t you? You’ll live a long life. If you can stay alive, that is. But to do that, you need to follow the rules of good girls. Make sure you do that.”

With that, she held out what was in her left hand: Mikoku in her work outfit.

Mikoku’s limbs and hair dangled limply down.

However, Shino found herself unable to react to this sudden guest, what that guest looked like, and what that guest said.

…Um…

While hesitating over what to do, Shiro arrived at her right side.

The dog peered at Mikoku’s face and poked at her forehead with his nose.

“Nn…”

Mikoku gave a troubled groan but did not wake. The woman lifted her up and away.

"Oops. It'd be a shame to let the dog wake her. Shino, get me some food. I'm starving and I need carbohydrates."

"Who are you?"

"Jord, a survivor of 10th-Gear's gods. …I'm 'Betrayed Expectations' Jord. You can call me God or Jord-chan or whatever. What I want to be called changes on a whim, but never call me 'old lady'. That's the rule. Got it? Now, let me in, Shino. And food. Get me some food."

Shino nodded, tapped Shiro's neck, and returned to the hallway.

Jord passed through the door as if shaking her large body.

"Oh."

Mikoku struck the doorframe and Shino gave a quick "ah" at the dull sound.

"Don't worry about it. I'm not made for precision."

"B-but…"

"It's fine, so keep quiet. I don't like kids who get worked up over trivial details. If you're going to scold me, then I'll have to scold you for staying up so late. But I won't do that, so you don't say anything to me. And get me some food. No complaints about that, right?"

Shino thought about it. She was worried about Mikoku's head and Jord was overly pushy, but she did not detect any hostility in the woman.

It made a lot of sense once she thought of it like quieting an animal by giving it food.

"Then come in. And please remove your shoes."

She stepped back into the entranceway and Jord smiled.

The corners of her mouth bent up, her eyes closed, and there was not a hint of sarcasm or ulterior motive behind the smile.

"Good. Children are best when they're honest, Shino. I'll be coming in then."

Jord bent her thick upper body in a bow.

Shino had not expected the sudden action, so she was late to bow back. She made up for it by waiting a full three seconds before straightening back up.

When she hesitantly raised her head, Jord was closing the door behind her. She hung Mikoku's back collar on the doorstopper and sat down in the entranceway.

"Ahh."

The floor creaked and the movement seemed to stir up the air.

As she watched Jord remove her military boots one at a time, Shino confirmed her decision that the woman was not a bad person.

“Jord, why are you fighting UCAT?”

“Sticking your nose into a woman’s secrets isn’t a good idea. I have my reasons. Just remember that. You have your own reasons, right? It isn’t good to ask for someone else’s reasons without explaining your own. And I like good girls, Shino.”

Jord sighed.

“I also don’t approve of children staying up this late. Hajji needs to be more thoughtful. What is he doing?”

“Oh, um, but…”

She started to bring up Mikoku, but cheers from the living room cut her off.

“I can’t believe what I’m seeing. The master is using the flexibility of the metal whip to strike his target’s crotch from front to back. And it forms a compact blow filled with the consideration of a true master!”

“Ah! No! Ow! That really-…! Hwah! Hwaaaaahh!!”

Jord glared in the direction of the realistically dubbed screams and cheers.

“I don’t approve of that either.”

Shino ran for the living room to change the channel.

●

Below the night sky, a mountain range was steeped in deep darkness.

The mountains were covered in forest and a narrow river and road ran through them.

The road had white streetlights at distant intervals.

Past the guardrails of the spottily lit road was a drop of around a dozen meters and rocky river bank. The river itself could not be seen in the darkness, but the loud sound of rushing water indicated its presence.

A single sound and light moved quickly through the light, the darkness, and the sounds of the river.

The sound was a motorcycle engine and the light was a headlight.

The large-displacement motorcycle was an old Kawasaki and two

people rode it.

The driver was a well-built boy who wore a brown mountain jacket to fight the cold. He gently tilted the large motorcycle to either side as he took the corners.

The one clinging to his back was a girl in a blue half coat.

The banking motorcycle and the wind blew her short hair about as she looked forward over his shoulder.

She was looking at the sky visible past the mountains and forest ahead.

Despite being night, the sky was tinged with purple thanks to the lights in the mountain.

She sighed and opened her mouth.

“IAI’s lights are still on. Did UCAT order them to keep the lights on to help defend against a possible attacker?”

“Probably. This is starting to feel pretty serious. What do you think, Chisato?”

The two of them, Izumo and Kazami, both looked to the brightness in the sky.

They would occasionally pass below a streetlight and the sky’s light would become difficult to make out.

“It doesn’t look like anything’s happening. And they have Hiba, Mikage, Harakawa, Heo, and everyone from 2nd there, so they should be fine even if there is an attack.”

“Are you worried?”

She paused before answering his question and she leaned against his back as she did so.

“I am worried.”

She felt the wind as a chill in her ears.

“I just can’t accept why Sayama would tell Team Leviathan to disband. …What about you, Kaku? Aren’t you worried with everyone splitting up at such a dangerous time?”

“I’m fine as long as you’re with me.”

“Oh, my.”

Kazami removed her cheek from his back and smiled bitterly.

She was about to express her gratitude, but then she felt his back press against her cheek once more.

However, he had not leaned back. She had been pushed forward.

“Kaku, why did you brake?”

“There’s a checkpoint up ahead. And isn’t that…?”

As the motorcycle slowed down, she looked past his back and indeed saw a checkpoint.

A “no entry” sign had been set up and two large white RVs blocked the road.

A red warning light lit up everything there.

She then noticed that the RVs were UCAT’s disguised security vehicles.

…It’s a UCAT checkpoint?

“Looks like they’re being really cautious about an attack. What a pain.”

Kazami agreed with Izumo.

However, she recognized the person waving the red warning light in front of one of the RVs.

“Ikkou-san?”

She called out from the motorcycle that was now moving at a walking pace and Ikkou looked up.

“Oh.” A narrow-eyed smile formed below his gray hair. “Sorry about the trouble. It’s just that things have quite dangerous recently.”

“Thanks for going to the trouble. …Are the others still on the other side?”

She pointed toward the bright sky past the mountain and Ikkou nodded.

“They should be. That’s why we were forced out here.”

“Ah.” Kazami shrunk down and lowered her head with a troubled look. “Sorry. And it’s so cold.”

“No, no, no. Do not worry about it. We have the UCAT director’s approval for this job.”

Ikkou lowered the warning light and lifted the “no entry” sign. He then placed the sign in the gap between the two RVs blocking the road.

“Hey, Ikkou-san. Why are you blocking our way?”

Kazami answered Izumo while hitting his shoulder.

“You idiot. It’s a checkpoint, so even we need to show our IDs.”

“That is not why,” said Ikkou.

He circled behind the RV on the valley river side and opened the trunk.

He pulled something out and rested it on his shoulder.

"Two meters long. This is short for an Azure Dragon Sword."

He approached as he spoke and the solid footsteps of his leather shoes rang through the night air.

The slow sound of the footsteps was joined by light in the Azure Dragon Sword's blade.

Kazami had a sudden thought about the scene before her.

…Huh?

"W-wait a second, Ikkou-san. What is going on?"

"You cannot tell?"

With that question, he arrived within three meters of them.

His sword's maximum reach was two meters, so he only had to take a step forward to be in range.

Kazami understood that much, but…

…Eh?

She could tell a forced smile had appeared on her lips, but not even she knew what it was meant to hide.

She only knew that Ikkou was slowly raising the Azure Dragon Sword.

"Hey! Chisato!"

Izumo's voice brought her back to her senses.

She felt like a sudden adjustment had come over her vision.

An attack was coming and it was coming from someone she knew, someone who had helped her for so long, and someone who had even saved her.

…Wh-why!?

When doubt prevented you from moving, it was called hesitation.

And as she hesitated, she saw Izumo's large back lower down as he prepared to move.

When she did see him move, she finally realized it was okay for her to move as well.

…But what for?

She knew the answer. It was only a possibility at this point, but it was likely true.

"Chisato! They were the attackers!!"

"Yes, I must apologize, but it was the four of us."

Once she realized that fact, she recalled the information on the attackers.

First, the men who had attacked Izumo UCAT had been covered in black, but one had wielded an Azure Dragon Sword.

Second, Gyes had said she knew them, but the match was not yet sufficient to make a public announcement.

…But…

"Wh-what is going on!? Why would Doctor Chao's four brothers attack us!?"

"It is a simple matter. You could call us the illegitimate children of 7th-Gear. In other words, we ourselves are the Concept Core."

So…

"How about we continue the Concept War?"

With those words, Ikkou made his attack.

He prepared to lower the raised Azure Dragon Sword along a diagonal path and it was clear what that path would do.

…He's trying to slice Kaku and me in two!

He was serious. That confused Kazami, but she opened her mouth regardless.

"I can't accept this!!"

She raised her right arm toward the sky.

"G-Sp2!!"

Her shout travelled high into the sky.

"Come!! We need to put a stop to this nonsense!!!"

A moment later, Ikkou's sword raced through the air.

A slicing sound followed.

Chapter 7

“Victorious Treachery”

And the cry turns to static

●

The nighttime battle in the mountains began with the sound of breaking metal.

As Ikkou swung his sword diagonally downwards, Izumo defended.

Kazami saw him forcibly twist the motorcycle's accelerator.

The large-displacement Kawasaki obediently responded to the sudden "full speed ahead" command.

The back wheel skidded a bit and pushed the bike forward.

While the back wheel pushed forward at full speed, the front wheel lost and rose up.

As if assisting the motorcycle's standing motion, Izumo swung up the hand holding the accelerator.

The rising vehicle was knocked toward Ikkou as if it had been kicked away.

Izumo then wrapped his right arm around Kazami's waist and kicked off the seat to jump backwards with her.

…Wow.

Izumo forcibly rotated around once and entered a low landing stance. She spun with him and her vision pointed in the same direction as his.

That was the front.

The front wheel rose like a snake's head and the motorcycle crashed into Ikkou.

Or more accurately, into his sword.

With the sound of scraping metal, the motorcycle was split in two along a horizontal line.

A silver line ran from left to right through the center of the seat.

The vehicle was made from plenty of metal, various components, and a thick frame, but it was all bisected as easily as tofu.

Kazami thought to herself while watching the heavy metal pieces collapse to either side.

…Is this a dream?

About a month before, she had been given a similar dream while fighting Roger of American UCAT.

In that dream, the motorcycle had been split apart by a strange power.

But that had been a false dream.

This was not.

“So you’re an enemy.”

With that comment, Izumo removed his right arm from her waist.

His eyes were looking past the motorcycle on the ground. They were trained on Ikkou.

“Come.”

The unusually low tone to his voice worried Kazami a little.

“Kaku.”

She called out to him, but he did not turn toward her.

Another voice then supported her worry.

“Now, how about I show you my brother’s fixed concept? Mitsuaki.”

Ikkou’s words were followed by a voice resembling the one produced by her own throat. This was the voice of a concept.

The voice spoke to another world that rejected the current one.

- **—There is no mutual understanding.**

With the sound of shattering glass, the world transformed.

●

After hearing the concept text, Kazami lost everything.

…Eh?

She understood what the concept meant. She could no longer comprehend any information the external world sent her way. It was a version of 2nd-Gear’s Art of Walking that encompassed the entire external world and could not be broken.

She understood the idea, but…

…It can’t be broken?

She could see and she could hear, but she could not understand what was happening around her.

She could see Ikkou standing beyond the wreckage of the motorcycle.

She could see him holding the Azure Dragon Sword.

However, she could not understand what it was she was seeing and hearing.

“Is this…!?”

Her ability to comprehend how she felt about her surroundings was completely lacking.

…What about Kaku!?

Wanting to know what he was doing, she turned left, but then she gasped.

Why she gasped was simple: she could not grasp that he was to her left.

He was to her left. She could see him there.

Nevertheless, she could not find him. Normally, seeing him would provide her with the information that "he is there", but that information would not reach her.

As she turned left toward him, her gaze continued right on past him. She had already turned to the dark night behind her.

…I don't know where he is.

She could not tell if he was there or not. To sum it up…

…We have no mutual understanding.

This was a world of only her own information.

She had nothing to compare to, so she could not even conclude that she was wrong.

Suddenly, her memories called forth a similar fact. Something much like this had happened recently.

…When Team Leviathan was ordered to temporarily disband.

She rebuked herself for thinking about that now, but she could not stop her thoughts.

"I can't understand it, I can't find a solid answer, and the world is absolute."

…What can I possibly do!?

While asking herself that, she still decided to move.

But that was when she heard a voice. However, it was a voice that's very existence she could not comprehend.

While desiring her next action, she heard that incomprehensible voice.

"Can you not move?"

She heard it, but she did not know what it said.

She faced forward. She knew the enemy was most likely there. She turned to face not an enemy she could see but one she could predict was there.

But just as she tried to step toward that enemy…

"…"

She could not move.

No. The truth was she did not want to move.

She knew why.

If she stayed there, she could at least know where the enemy and Izumo had been at first.

…But if I take even a single step, I won't even know where I am.

The thought of losing her own reference point made her shudder and panic.

She knew she had to move, but her body was trapped by the fear of not knowing where she was going.

The pressure in the bottom of her feet told her the ground was below them.

"But I don't know where the enemy is!"

If she lifted a foot, she would no longer even know the ground was there. Like carelessly taking a wrong step on a staircase, she might not know where to step and miss the ground altogether.

Then she would fall and not even be able to stand.

…Dammit.

Her anger formed words.

"Why? Why did it all have to end up like this!?"

She felt urgency in her gut due to a variety of things and she let out the thoughts that could not reach anyone.

"Why!?"

●

"What is the meaning of this?"

White light leaked out of the small building of Okutama Station.

The white-walled building resembled a mountain cottage and Sayama crossed his arms in front of it.

He spoke to what lay beyond his gaze and beyond the shadows formed by the light extending from the open building.

"Doctor Chao, why are you waiting for me here?"

He looked at Chao and his eyes narrowed in on the slender face of that girl-like woman.

Chao then spoke with her mouth twisting into what might have been a smile.

"Well, there's a lot I'd like to say. But are you sure this is a good

idea? Are you really heading into the mountains unarmed when someone could attack?"

"Okutama is my home ground, I am familiar with the land, and I have not forgotten…"

He thought while he spoke. Due to Team Leviathan temporary disbanding, he had not brought any UCAT products with him. Besides what he had borrowed from the Tamiya family, he had brought a few other necessities. For example, the handheld digital recorder with an edited compilation of Shinjou's voice, his Shinjou album, a full set of Shinjou goods, and…

…*With my imagination, I have more than enough!*

He nodded and spoke to Chao with a relieved look.

"I have not forgotten anything."

"I'm not sure what that was about, but I'm glad to hear it."

She glared at him and he tilted his head.

"But," he began. "Why have you shown up just before my delightful mountain-climbing trip? Do you have something to say concerning the current cultural exchange between my former teammates and the four old brothers?"

"Oh? You're pretty sharp."

Chao had a smile in her tone, pulled a cigarette from her white coat's pocket, and placed the paper cylinder between her lips.

"Well, it wouldn't have been too hard to figure out if you gave it some thought. Four brothers of unknown origin were working underneath me, the person in charge of 7th-Gear."

She raised her head which indeed held a smile. It was a pale smile with the eyebrows slightly lowered.

"I'm guessing the reason no one else figured it out was that they couldn't bring themselves to believe it. But you seem to be different, grandson of Sayama. You will take us on, won't you? Let's see, right now you're…"

"Team Leviathan has been freely disbanded."

"So should I call you the main force of Japanese UCAT?"

With that, she removed the cigarette and exhaled smoke.

The smoke spread through the air, but she opened a hole by breathing out her next breath and the two of them faced each other through it.

"You actually saved us by catching up before those four reached

their limit. And that's why you need to be tested to see if Low-Gear is worthy of receiving 7th-Gear's Concept Core."

"Can you not accomplish that via the Leviathan Road?"

"This is the Leviathan Road, grandson of Sayama. This is the same negotiation you have brought to the other Gears. The only difference is that 7th-Gear is taking it to you this time. Yes, just like before."

"Just like before?"

Chao smiled bitterly at Sayama's question.

"That's right. On September 29 of 1945, people from 7th-Gear invaded the Izumo Company, but they left without killing anyone or destroying anything. Do you know why?"

"A simple question: because they were curious."

What a boring question, thought Sayama as he answered and stepped forward.

After approaching through the darkness by one step, he adjusted the bag on his back.

"Doctor Chao, you have altered your body to extend your life, but when was that done? Based on your apparent age, was it done during the Concept War so you could battle 7th-Gear? And it was most likely done using the 7th-Gear techniques you had acquired at that point. Am I wrong?"

Even as he asked, he continued speaking.

"Based on the four brothers, I can guess 7th-Gear excelled at techniques to strengthen the human body. And as the Divine States-World Interaction Theory places it in China, I can also guess it was the world of the sage gods. They had mastered everything they could as people, so they attempted the final task they had left. In other words…"

An old man's voice continued from Sayama's right. It was Nijun's voice.

"They gathered together the ultimate power they had gained through their various forms of training. They combined the individual sage gods' powers and created the ultimate of the ultimate."

"And that is the four of you?"

Nijun, the old man in a white coat, appeared from the darkness, but he did not nod.

Instead, Chao blew out some smoke.

“It was funny. When they invaded again, they completely cornered us, but they rejoiced when they saw the human modification facility I had built below Japanese UCAT.”

“They had found someone in this boring Gear who understood them. 7th-Gear viewed their human modification techniques as entertainment, so it must have been a shock to them. They realized the people of this ridiculous Gear could ‘enjoy themselves’ just as they could. Doctor Chao, that was why they invited you to 7th-Gear, wasn’t it? And as for you four brothers…”

Sayama turned to Nijun.

“The residents of 7th-Gear created the ultimate power by combining with their Concept Core. Are you that Core’s borrowed form after it was split in four?”

He took a step back from Nijun as he spoke. He turned to the side to prepare for a fight, but Nijun quietly shook his head.

“Sayama-sama, people will notice us here and I am the shyest of my brothers.”

“I see,” said Sayama while maintaining his defensive stance.

…What is the situation?

Chao was there and some of the other brothers might have been there too.

He told himself not to let his guard down while Chao waved her right hand back and forth.

“Don’t be in such a rush, grandson of Sayama. We’ve waited for sixty years. While modifying those four on the other side, I spent an even longer time in a space that seemed to distort time. …So we can wait a little longer. Oh, I know. How about until you’ve had time to look around in the mountains? We can do this once you come down.”

“In other words, you plan to interrupt me while I am happily descending the mountain with thoughts of Shinjou-kun in my head?”

Still ready for a fight, Sayama glared at the other two.

“I am willing to do it here. How about you?”

His question was answered by a movement from Chao.

She took a step to the side to move from his path away from the station and she shrugged.

“I stand on the side of 7th-Gear since they invited me as a guest. I’ve sent in my letter of resignation along with theirs. …But I won’t

interfere. I'll just watch on and make sure they can do this properly."

With that, she put her hand in her white coat's pockets.

"And since you're going mountain-climbing, let me give you a piece of meaningless information. The only two who went to Professor Kinugasa's home looking for documents on Georgius were your father and your mother."

"My mother? Why?"

"That's simple. She was helping your father. She was the one that actually found Professor Kinugasa's documents. Do you know why they needed them?"

"Was it for a battle? Perhaps a large-scale one in Osaka?"

Sayama's words received a whistle in response. Chao sent the noise into the sky.

"Nicely said. I can't tell you anything else, so if you want to know more, go play with those four. …Listen. If you defeat them, they will give you the Concept Core and some information on the past. After all, those four brothers fought in that Osaka battle."

"!?"

"Those related to the Leviathan Road are forbidden to reveal the past, but this is a special case since we brought the fight to you. That rule no longer applies. Even if it's only a few fragments of information, you should come to understand quite a bit."

As she spoke, Nijun swayed in the corner of Sayama's vision.

The old man was about to vanish so he could wait in the battlefield he would share with Sayama.

"…!"

Sayama immediately began to move.

He took an instantaneous step that flowed into a right roundhouse kick.

It was a demonstration for the opponent and a feint meant to keep the man from escaping.

If the man was not planning to fight now, it meant he was not prepared.

That meant Sayama could not let him escape. The suddenness and the distance between them precluded a clean hit, but the feint of a kick was the first step to reach one.

"…!?"

However, Sayama both saw and realized that his own body would not move in the slightest.

…What?

Confusion filled his motionless body.

Even as a feint, he had poured all his strength into the kick, but his body remained in the defensive stance from before.

He could not move.

…What is this?

"That is Nijun's concept. Sayama, he might just be the worst possible opponent for you."

He heard Chao speak, but Nijun was nowhere to be seen.

As he wondered when the man had vanished, Chao's voice filled the chilly night air around him.

"Let us enjoy this, grandson of Sayama. And I hope your teammates do the same. 7th-Gear desired a satisfied destruction after fulfilling their own enjoyment. Once they reached the climax of their happiness, they wished to welcome in the end and entrust themselves to the next generation."

And…

"Can you accept 7th-Gear's happiness? Can you lead those four brothers to destruction not through a harsh battle, but through enjoyment? Can you use these battles to give them a happiness that exceeds that of 7th-Gear which left everything to me and was destroyed?"

Her questions resounded and hung in the air, but finally silence washed over their surroundings along with a warm night wind.

Sayama heard dried leaves scattering across the small space in front of the station building.

His eyes looked to his own shadow on the asphalt and Chao beyond it.

"Quite a one-sided proposition. But either away, I have no objection to enjoying all things, but making it obligatory will cost you."

He looked up to a place a bit lower than the heavens. The mountains of Okutama formed a darkness even deeper than the night.

After the span of a breath, he spoke while staring into that darkness.

“I just hope my former teammates can enjoy it.”

“Will they be okay? According to Hiba’s grandson, Kazami and the others aren’t accepting your temporary disbanding of Team Leviathan.”

“Even I am half in doubt about it.”

As he spoke, Sayama walked forward. His leather shoes produced steady footsteps and he arrived next to Chao.

“But I believe it is necessary. If you will delightfully and happily oppose us, then the reason I had Team Leviathan disband will become all the more obvious.”

Chao asked a question as he approached.

“Do you mean you are implicitly telling them to back off now because it is dangerous? Are you telling the members of Team Leviathan to leave the front lines because the battle is about to grow even more dangerous?”

Sayama gave his answer while walking past her.

He smiled ever so slightly.

“…”

And then he gave his parting words.

“Farewell, Doctor Chao.”

He passed by her and continued walking. He made his way into the Okutama mountains and to the path that would take him forward.

He did not bother turning back toward the late autumn wind.

●

Kazami could not move.

She was in a space where she could not know what to do.

Part of her said she had to do something and another part of her told her to give up because she could not do anything, so she was left unable to choose either option.

The word impatience filled her heart.

She could not comprehend anything in her field of vision and nothing that entered her ears held any meaning to her.

All she could understand was herself.

…But…

If she did not understand her opponent, she could not fight.

She saw someone else step out of one of the RVs blocking the

road. It was a short-haired old man in a white coat, but she did not know who he was or even that he had left the RV.

A meaningless voice reached her.

“Brother Ikkou, how is my fixed concept working?”

“Mitsuaki, it is a little short on fun, but it is very effective. It is incredibly hard to use.”

“Then what will you do? This is plenty fun for me.”

“Well, to increase my fun, why not give Kazami-sama and Izumo-sama a single chance.”

終わりのクロニクル

“A single chance?”

Ikkou nodded at Mitsuaki’s question.

At that point, something appeared from the northern sky beyond the mountain.

They were two lines of light.

Each light had a weapon at the front: the white spear named G-Sp2 and the white sword named V-Sw.

Those weapons were very familiar to Kazami.

“…”

But she could not understand what was flying their way.

At the same time, her own senses brought a question to mind.

…Shouldn’t G-Sp2 and V-Sw be arriving about now?

How long had it been since she had shouted the name of that trustworthy weapon?

She raised her right hand and waited for a sensation in her palm.

She could not comprehend light or sound in this world, but she could faintly feel the sensation of the ground below her feet.

She was not feeling the repelling force of the ground itself. She was feeling the pressure as the skin on the bottom of her feet was pressed into her flesh by the ground.

Because she could only understand herself in this world, she could easily understand the sensations of her own body.

She would feel something in her palm because something had flown into her hand.

The moment after that was her chance to attack.

She remembered where her opponent had been the moment before entering the concept space. She had not moved a step, so there was not much to mislead her.

Once she had her weapon in hand, she could run across the unseen ground and attack the enemy’s estimated location.

That’s enough, she thought.

“!”

In that instant, what she wanted reached her hand.

“G-Sp2!”

Her reflexes immediately accomplished everything.

She felt G-Sp2’s handle slip into her hand. Its speed had not dropped, so G-Sp2 must not have been able to comprehend her either. She forced it to a stop by squeezing her right hand around it.

It was hers now.

The brief friction heat in her palm made it feel like she had grabbed fire, but she did not care. The sense of heat was reassuring in this sensationless space.

She forcibly spun G-Sp2 around to ensure it was there.

She pointed the tip forward as if thrusting it.

"…!!"

And she ran.

She ran across the visible yet unseen ground to reach the enemy she could see yet could not locate.

Her first step felt a little low, so she raised her hips on the second step. That second step felt tilted to the right, so she steadied her footing on the third step.

She ran.

She raised G-Sp2 in order to swing it toward where she estimated the enemy to be.

That location was a bit to her right.

There was one reason she had chosen the right.

…Kaku is on the left.

He had held her on the right when getting off the motorcycle, so he would be on the left.

She knew he would have called in V-Sw, but he lacked the same burst of speed she had. That meant she would be out ahead of him.

If she charged in on the right and drove the enemy to the left, she would be sending them right in Izumo's attack.

She was certain he was thinking of the same cooperation.

…Yes.

She agreed in her heart, nodded with her body, and continued to soar onward.

She stepped forward to attack with the speed of her run and poured her entire body into jabbing the spear tip forward.

G-Sp2 would not know what was going on as she held it.

…Sorry. This must be scary.

I'll explain later, once we leave this incomprehensible concept space.

So bear with it until then, she pleaded. *Don't worry. We're strong.*

Then the moment she had hoped for arrived.

She collided with something.

Starting with a pressure in her hand, the impact spread throughout her body.

A sensation like breaking through a wall spread from her hand to her arm, her arm to her shoulder, and her shoulder to her entire body. Soon, she shifted to press her entire bodyweight forward.

Something had stopped the spear tip.

It had been blocked.

By what? she wondered, while also thinking, *We've won.*

Their enemy wielded only an Azure Dragon Sword. With the skill to slice apart a motorcycle, he could likely stop her spear with just the sword tip, but it was still just an Azure Dragon Sword.

It could not defeat G-Sp2 which contained 10th-Gear's Concept Core.

Kazami instantly operated the console.

"Change to your second form."

When G-Sp2 had flown to her, the shield portion had already been attached below the tip, so the cannon form could be quickly completed. If she fired while their blades were locked, she could easily destroy the Azure Dragon Sword.

And meanwhile…

…Kaku will arrive and attack the defenseless opponent.

"Fire the-…"

"Are you sure, Kazami-sama?"

She heard a voice but did not understand its meaning.

She could feel the movements of G-Sp2 transforming in her hands and it would soon finish.

Afterwards, she only needed to hit the firing switch.

"Kazami-sama, are you having fun?"

The incomprehensible voice arrived again.

"Then allow me to provide even more fun. Mitsuaki, please release your fixed concept. I wish to show them my fixed concept and the concept weapon we stole from Izumo UCAT."

A moment later, Kazami heard a voice.

- **—Strength is infinite.**

Finally hearing a voice from the outside world surprised her.

Having gone for so long without hearing anything caused the concept text to sound all the louder.

And that was not all.

“Eh?”

The world around her changed.

Comprehension returned to the incomprehensible world.

●

Kazami saw the darkness around her and a small light.

The darkness was the night that filled the sky and the light was the white streetlight illuminating the area.

She stood on the asphalt and she held a long white spear.

The spear had transformed to its cannon form, but the pointed tip had been blocked by the Azure Dragon Sword.

The wind blew.

“…”

The cold air travelled up into the night from behind her. That wind that seemed to well up from the ground gave her a chill and she narrowed her eyes.

Only then did she grasp the situation.

“Why?”

A word wrapped in dazed confusion escaped her lips.

Ahead of her, Ikkou held an Azure Dragon Sword in his left hand. That was the sword that had stopped G-Sp2, but…

“Two of them!?”

The fact before her eyes answered her question.

Ikkou also held an Azure Dragon Sword in his right hand. The thick metal blade reflected the light and…

…It blocked V-Sw.

Izumo stood to her left. His eyebrows were slightly raised and he tried to press V-Sw against the Azure Dragon Sword.

However, Ikkou remained motionless. He was holding back their full strength with the weapons he held in a single arm.

As she wondered how, he tilted his head.

“Hm,” he muttered. “This is Rowless, the concept weapon I stole. Don’t worry. It is a weak weapon. It is made with simple steel, but it easily breaks. To make up for that, it can reproduce itself nearly infinitely.”

Izumo snorted at the old man's explanation.

"For being such weak Azure Dragon Swords, they're sure stopping our weapons easily enough, Ikkou-san."

Kazami nearly nodded in agreement, but she realized she could not agree.

…He isn't blocking us with the Azure Dragon Swords.

Ikkou had no strength gathered in his arms.

"Kazami-sama seems to have noticed. This is thanks to my fixed concept that activated just now."

The concept text had said strength is infinite.

"Inside the concept space I control, all weapons have their strength set to infinite. These small blades and your weapons all have identically infinite attack power. And…"

And…

"If they have any power in reserve, it will be drawn out."

Kazami heard two sounds.

They were high-pitched groans coming from the weapons in her and Izumo's hands.

G-Sp2 and V-Sw almost seemed to be screaming.

"W-wait! What is it, G-Sp2!?"

"————"

The color green filled G-Sp2's console and a single value appeared there.

"18%."

The percentage increased along with the machine's loud scream. It reached nineteen, twenty, and then jumped to the thirties too quickly to count.

"G-Sp2!?"

The weapon shook as if writhing in agony. The irregular shaking formed waves as if the individual shakes were synchronizing and the entire device seemed to jump up.

V-Sw was doing the same and Izumo was operating the console in a frantic attempt to restrain the sword's vibrations.

But they would not stop. Both shaking weapons emitted voices loud enough to echo off the surrounding forest and they gathered wind around themselves.

They almost seemed to be entering their third forms on their own.

They were out of control.

To obey the will of the Concept Cores, the weapons drew out their power to the very limit. That power had constructed an entire world and the force that usually restrained them was releasing it with no attempt to stop it.

…Wait!

The console's value jumped to the forty percent range.

A chill ran down Kazami's spine. During the battle with 5th-Gear the month before, she had measured an output of 38%. That had only partially produced 10th-Gear's concept dragon, but it had still covered around a dozen kilometers in the sky and devoured the 5th-Gear mechanical dragons like nothing.

She now saw an even higher number in her hands.

It had easily reached and exceeded the power she could draw out herself.

She shuddered.

"W-wait!"

The vibration in her hands had grown to the level of an impact.

A moment later, G-Sp2 and V-Sw both transformed.

They revealed their third forms.

"…!?"

But Kazami looked past G-Sp2 as it rose up in front of her.

Ikkou kept his two blades pressed against the rampaging G-Sp2 and V-Sw's blades.

Firework-like sparks scattered from the points of contact and lit up the area.

Light began to leak from the gaps in G-Sp2 and V-Sw's cowlings. They could not contain their own power inside.

…Not good!

She cried out in her heart at the same moment Ikkou spoke.

"Isn't this fun, Kazami-sama, Izumo-sama?"

"Wh-what are you talking about!? If they go off here, you'll be blown away too!"

"You are bearers of power. Don't you find it fun to be able to use that power at its maximum?"

She did not understand what he meant.

Power was dangerous. Knowing that fact was one of the duties of those who fought.

…How can you enjoy it?

She instantly pulled G-Sp2 back. She wanted to remove the restraint of the Azure Dragon Sword and then think.

…I need to defeat this enemy before they explode!!

Her initial burst of speed would decide everything, so the moment after pulling G-Sp2 back, she thrust the tip toward the enemy's gut.

It was a swift attack.

The light leaking from the tip and the gaps of the cowling trailed behind it like mist and formed a straight line.

The white light raced toward the enemy's gut.

"I see you still do not understand."

Ikkou swung down the Azure Dragon Sword in his left hand.

The steel sword collided with the spear that bore a Concept Core and attempted to pierce him with that light.

"Trying to attack with a weapon that is not yet even halfway to infinite? How boring."

With those words, one of the weapons was destroyed.

That weapon was the large white spear.

The destruction greatly resembled shattering glass.

Kazami first saw a point about halfway up the spear tip swell out a bit.

A moment later, the white external cowling split and burst almost all the way to the handle. The inner frame was covered in squeezing cracks and it expanded before bursting as well. The thirty centimeter protective cylinder guarding the Concept Core was released the instant the impact hit and it prepared to be ejected outside.

"It hurts."

That message appeared just before the console blacked out and the protective cylinder was contained by the part of the external cowling that had not been fully destroyed.

However, the destruction did not end there.

Kazami felt pain in her hands. The pain resembled grabbing a handful of thumbtacks.

The handle she held was also covered in cracks.

"Wha-…?"

When she turned around, she saw the third form's foot pedal bend and then break and she saw the vertical tail wing shatter like a glass panel hit by a stone.

Finally, the entire white cowling burst like a firework.

G-Sp2 had been destroyed.

"!?"

Even as the fragments tore at her hands and skin, Kazami watched.

She saw G-Sp2 stop as if it had lost a battle of strength.

"You're kidding…"

She blankly stared at the mass of metal remaining in her hands.

She waved it a little, but it simply felt heavy and lacked the life of a weapon.

She noticed that the protective cylinder inside the tip had left its proper spot.

10th-Gear's Concept Core was held inside that.

With it removed, the console was silent and its owner could feel the weapon's weight once more.

Would G-Sp2 return to normal if that cylinder was restored to its proper place? Would the weight vanish, would words appear on the console, would the damage disappear, and would it be able to fight again?

Kazami subconsciously reached for the protective cylinder.

Only once her hand touched the metal cylinder did she realize her hand was covered in blood.

She also realized it hurt.

"Ah."

She finally remembered what she was trying to do and what the situation was.

When she looked up, she saw a raised Azure Dragon Sword.

Ikkou was swinging the left blade toward her.

"——————"

It's over, she thought. *I can't avoid it. The weight left in my hands is too much.*

More importantly, her legs suddenly refused to move.

Her experience told her where the sword would arrive: ten centimeters below her neck.

With the speed and thickness of the blade…no, while inside this concept space, the sword would slice her in two.

At least it won't cut my face apart, she thought in her horribly calm yet somehow lacking state of mind.

She would be cut through.

But just before she was, three things rushed in front of her.

One was a large white sword.

Another was Izumo's body.

And the last was his voice.

"Oh…"

That vowel sound extended on and on as his giant body moved between her and the blade.

V-Sw collided with the Azure Dragon Sword and loudly shattered.

Simply put, he had saved her.

But Ikkou did something else.

He had already swung the Azure Dragon Sword in his right hand.

"…"

The second sword silently came from the left like a cold wind.

The blade's trajectory and length could reach both Izumo and Kazami who he was trying to protect.

It would slice through her below the chest and him above the waist.

No, she thought.

But not even she knew what that word in her heart meant. She could not say if she was stating that it was over for them or if she was protesting the situation.

She simply thought the word "no".

And then Izumo took action.

He sent his weapon crashing into the Azure Dragon Sword. He used the most primitive weapon provided by the human body: the fist.

What happened when two infinite weapons collided?

Kazami saw the answer.

Both of them were destroyed.

The Azure Dragon Sword burst to pieces like a spray of water.

"Kaku!!"

Starting from Izumo's left fist, cracks ran halfway up his forearm and the arm was smashed to pieces.

A dark spray was thrown into the night air.

Kazami heard a scream and guessed it was Izumo's. The loud scream seemed to extend on and on.

But as she listened, she realized something.

The voice she heard did not belong to Izumo who collapsed before her eyes.

…That's my scream.

"Ahh!"

Her cry resounded through the night sky.

Chapter 8

“Troublesome Visit”

You cannot reach them
You cannot reach them
You end up distancing yourself

●

A white automatic door slid open with a rumble to reveal the area beyond.

A paper with the word “open” on it was placed on the door which led to a room.

The white room gave a view from four stories up and an old man sat at the large desk inside.

The man wore a lab coat and glasses and he quickly looked away from the computer when he saw who had entered the room.

“Ah! I-I wasn’t doing anything inappropriate, Brunhild-kun! I certainly wasn’t enjoying a self-made 18+ game while I worked on it! After all, it’s still in debug!”

“There’s more than enough reason for you to die, Ooshiro, but make sure you answer my question before falling into an eternal sleep that is anything but peaceful.”

Brunhild wore a school uniform, had a small bird on her head, and was accompanied by a black cat at her feet. Ooshiro reacted in two different ways: he brought a hand to his forehead and he spoke with a sigh.

“Ahh, sorry, Brunhild-kun. Could you ask one thing of me at a time? What do you want first?”

“You’re right. First, fall into eternal sleep.”

“I thought your question came first!”

He spun around while shouting and a set of knuckles struck him from the side.

He rose into the air before falling back to the floor while #8 continued cleaning the window next to him.

“Testament. That reaction was directly from the manual. I do not detect the slightest problem. I am emotionally stable.”

“Th-that was a really solid hit! #-#8-kun, are you prepared to take responsibility for this!?”

“Testament,” she replied while pulling a cellphone from her pocket. “Internal line #259? I have some burnable trash awaiting disposal. I take full responsibility for-…”

“I don’t want that kind of responsibility!!”

“That’s right. Wait just a second, doll. My business comes first.” Brunhild crossed her arms. “Besides, burning him isn’t enough to

get rid of him. The air currents will carry the rising smoke and pollute the world. When it rains, all of us will be soaked with Ooshiro rain."

"Testament. I have determined that would be dangerous. I was too careless. I will take responsibility and find another method for disposing of him. …Anyway, what do you need, Brunhild-sama?"

"Well, I hear Team Leviathan disbanded and Izumo and Kazami were injured."

"That is not entirely accurate."

Brunhild raised an eyebrow and the cat tapped on her shin, so she kicked it.

"What isn't accurate? Are Kazami and Izumo okay?"

"Testament," replied a voice from the corridor.

Brunhild looked over her shoulder and saw someone in a white combat coat enter the room.

"Sibyl? How are Kazami, Sayama, and the others?"

"Testament. Sayama-sama has left for Professor Kinugasa's home in the Okutama mountain range and Shinjou-sama has left for Sakai. Chisato-sama is unharmed because we arrived shortly after Izumo-sama protected her."

"Then…"

Both Brunhild's eyebrows rose slightly and Sibyl closed her eyes.

"Izumo-sama's left forearm and hand were completely lost and he has yet to regain consciousness. Neither of their weapons have shown any signs of life even after some simple repairs. Also…"

She opened her eyes and looked directly at Brunhild as if that were all she could do.

"Chisato-sama refuses to leave Izumo-sama's side…and she will not speak with anyone else or even look them in the eye."

The light in Sibyl's eyes wavered.

"Ah," muttered Brunhild with a frown just before Sibyl looked up to the ceiling.

"Wahhhhh! Chisato-sama won't speak with me! I know I've been focusing on Mikage-sama more recently and I know I haven't been keeping up with her diet notebook, but this is too much! What's wrong with a little fat!? What's wrong with a soft body!? That only applies to Chisato-sama, though!"

Sibyl ran out into the corridor in tears and Brunhild glared after

her.

#8 turned her back to resume cleaning the window. Ooshiro faced his computer and made comments of “good” and “yes” which Brunhild decided she would rather not know any more about.

Those two were clearly intending to ignore Sibyl, so Brunhild nodded toward Ooshiro in particular.

She then took in a breath, opened her mouth wide, and shouted into the corridor.

“Ooshiro made Sibyl cry!!”

“Whaaaaat!?”

Several dozen confused replies came over the broadcast system, soon followed by the sound of a group posing.

“Let’s go, everyone! It’s eavesdropping time!!”

“It’s eavesdropping time!!!!”

Suddenly, all sound vanished from Japanese UCAT save a voice in the corridor.

“Wahhhhhh! Chisato-samaaaaaa!!”

Once the echoing crying settled down, Ooshiro frantically stood up.

“B-Brunhild-kun, how could you lie about this!? Something bad is going to happen to me!”

Meanwhile, an unseen judgment was given.

It began by trapping him.

The external defense shutters closed over all the windows to keep the prey from escaping.

She had been cleaning the windows, so #8 briefly looked at the inside of the closed shutter.

“I have determined cleaning the outside of the windows will be harder now.”

With that, she stuck the detergent container and rag between the window and shutter and used gravitational control to clean it from the outside. Ooshiro gave an impressed nod but then turned toward Brunhild in sudden realization.

“O-oh, no! I can’t escape!!”

“Why not escape through the floor like usual?”

“You’re right! I can do that!! …Secret Technique: Floorboard Reversal!!”

With that shout, he stomped on the floor with his right foot.

This activated a mechanism in the floor and one of the floorboards audibly hopped upwards.

He peered down and found a Japanese UCAT combat personnel aiming a rifle up at him.

The metal barrel and the red laser point extending from it were trained directly on his forehead.

The man wore a gas mask and Ooshiro wore his glasses, so the two exchanged a glance through their respective lenses.

"————!"

Ooshiro frantically stomped the floorboard closed on top of the soldier below and someone started banging from below.

He jumped up and down a few times to force it down and then pulled instant glue and self-defense gas spray from his pocket. He glued the floorboard to the ground and stuck the gas spray nozzle into the remaining gap.

"Take this! It's our new product 'My Breath – Yakiniku, the Morning After'!!"

After the sound of spraying, a shout of agony came from below the floor before vanishing.

Ooshiro continued spraying for a full five seconds after the resistance ended and then he stood up.

"Hm. That was a close one."

He stepped from the sealed floorboard and onto another one.

This time, the mechanism opened a portion of the ceiling.

A man in stealth equipment dangled upside down from the hole.

Ooshiro reacted by jumping up to close the ceiling while grabbing "It Tingles!", a stun gun that could be locked in the "on" setting, and alley-ooping it into the closing hole.

The ceiling closed just as someone could be heard writhing in pain on the other side.

Ooshiro sighed and landed in a light crouched pose.

This time, part of the wall opened.

"————!!!"

He closed that hole, but more and more opened in the floor, ceiling, walls, and back of his locker, so he had to close all of them.

After seeing him toss one of his socks into a hole in the floor, Brunhild sighed.

"This is almost over. We didn't know each other long, but we

made plenty of awful memories. Farewell."

"B-Brunhild-kun, you really are cement-like to the core! You old cement lady!!"

She had been about to leave the room, but she stopped.

He clapped his hands behind her.

"Yeah, you heard me! I'm younger!! Younger!!"

She stomped hard on the floorboards while turning around, five holes opened in the floor at once, gun barrels poked out of them all, and Ooshiro closed them all with a body press.

"B-Brunhild-kun!" he said from the floor. "What would happen to UCAT if I was shot!?"

"They'd probably mourn the loss…officially at least. A few seconds later, they would celebrate the monumental event."

She ignored him as he pretended to cry, rolled around, and hit the wall.

"Well, I'll be going. Kazami and the others are at the hospital, aren't they?"

"Yes," replied Sibyl who had returned to the corridor while rubbing the corners of her eyes. "But all of them expect Chisato-sama should be leaving for Hiba-sama's dojo soon. They were planning to spend the night there. But Chisato-sama…"

"She's going to stay with Izumo. That's fine. …I just have something to give the ones who can still move around."

"Something to give them?"

Brunhild nodded, reached into her uniform's pocket, but did not pull her hand back out.

"Siegfried found something in the Kinugasa Library that Team Leviathan should see. …It isn't anything much, though."

With that, Sibyl finally stopped her tears and looked over in surprise.

Happy with that, Brunhild opened her mouth with the chirping bird providing background music.

"Ooshiro, let me tell you something. A tremor is approaching here from below, so why don't you escape through the corridor?"

Ooshiro stopped hammering nails into the floor and gave her a thumbs up.

"N-nice one, Brunhild-kun! I'll put you in my game!! It's a life mahjong game titled 'I am the Riichi!' and the tagline is 'Always play

the wrong tile in life!'. How about it!?"

Brunhild hesitated. She could not decide what spell to blast him with or if she should first attack the black cat to buy time for a large-scale destruction spell.

But Ooshiro suddenly froze in place.

A slender hand had grabbed his shoulder from the side.

"#-#8-kun? Explain this hand."

"Testament. I have determined it is my right hand. And please wait a moment, UCAT Director."

She spoke with her usual expression and with the footsteps of heavily-equipped soldiers racing down the corridor.

"I have yet to fulfill my responsibility."

●

The nighttime scenery outside the window moved to the east.

Beyond the faint light of a city was a dark plain and above that was only darkness.

The dark plain was the sea and the darkness above was the night sky.

The window moving along that scenery belonged to a night train.

Someone stood in the shop located in the rear car of the Osaka-bound train. Shinjou was bent over a bit by the window and held a gray phone receiver.

The ends of her eyebrows lowered a little.

"Okay, Heo. So is Kazami-san okay?"

A nervous voice answered her from the receiver.

"Y-yes, but Izumo's left arm was…um…how should I put it? It's like from a movie?"

While listening to the extent of his injury, Shinjou recalled Izumo's divine protection.

He must have been fighting within a concept that rendered it meaningless.

"They were fighting those four brothers who are always with Doctor Chao, weren't they?"

"Yes." Heo hesitated a little, but finally continued. "But how weird are they compared to the rest of you? I-I can use that to decide how cautious to be."

"I'm not sure I like how you put that… But using Ooshiro units,

they're probably about a fifth an Ooshiro."

"Eek! W-we can't handle that."

"Don't worry. Harakawa-kun is with you, right? If things get dangerous, you can always run away."

"Yes, but can I really rely on Harakawa?"

"Why not? Is that a problem?"

Shinjou heard movement on the other end as Heo covered the receiver with a hand.

Heo then took in a breath and whispered.

"U-um, well, you see? I made him mad earlier."

"…? Why?"

"Well, uh… He was feeling around inside me and…"

"Inside you!?"

"Yes. He had me sit in the seat, grabbed the thick rod, said we had to perform a test, and even took records. Then he told me it was time to combine."

"Th-that really is taking it seriously…"

"Oh, but it didn't hurt. It tickled a lot and made my heart race, but, uh, as I sat there in a daze, I realized people were watching. … But Harakawa said he wasn't doing anything wrong, so I think he meant he would take responsibility for whatever happened."

"Y-you two certainly are progressing at a Western rate. … Harakawa doesn't say much normally, but he sounds really intense."

"Yes. But part of me wonders if I'm reading too much into it."

"I-I don't think so. If he's taking it that far, he's definitely committed!"

"But then why did he get mad at me?"

"Well…"

Shinjou thought and remembered an answer she had seen in a magazine.

"Oh, I know, Heo! You need to work to make him happy too! Like, um, embracing him or wrapping your legs around him while you do it."

"B-but I'd crush him into mincemeat if I did that then."

Harakawa-kun is surprisingly delicate, thought Shinjou.

"Th-then…y-you can vocally tell him how much you like it."

"Vocally? You mean like sing? My great-grandfather taught me how to yodel."

“Singing like that would make you a pervert. So, um, well, this is hard to say, but…you can just say how you feel or what you want him to do.”

“Oh, that I can manage. Nice advice, Shinjou. I’ll do my best.”

Shinjou nodded and breathed a sigh of relief.

…I somehow managed to give some advice as her elder.

And as if responding to her thoughts, another sigh of relief reached her over the phone.

“I’m glad I could discuss this with you, Shinjou. You gave off a scent of knowing a lot about this kind of thing.”

“I’d really like to know where you learned to speak Japanese like that, but…well…you should be fine.”

She smiled bitterly, wondered if they had both managed to relax, and looked up to see a train station passing by out the window.

The train was passing through Izu near Atami.

…I’m going so far away.

That thought produced words hoping for the opposite.

“Are you sure I shouldn’t head back? The train is stopping at Nagoya for a bit, so I could get off and take a night train or taxi back.”

“Harakawa said you don’t have to come back since we can’t contact Sayama to have him come back. He said the two of you are like a set even when you’re apart.”

“I need to have a word with Harakawa-kun next time I see him. … But does that mean he actually trusts Sayama-kun?”

“It’s hard to say. The nuance was more on not knowing much about the Leviathan Road and so not intruding too much.”

…What a rational view.

She thought that was a lot like Harakawa, but she did not want to say so in front of Heo.

But if Harakawa felt that way, Hiba would likely agree as his underclassman.

“Then I’ll continue on to Sakai. Call me if something happens there.”

“Sure. Oh, come to think of it, there was just an explosion on the fourth floor of Japanese UCAT.”

“An explosion? The fourth floor would be Ooshiro-san’s room, wouldn’t it? In that case, you don’t need to worry about it.”

“R-really? But it was an explosion.”

Shinjou heard a confused pause, but that only showed Heo’s inexperience with UCAT. She would adapt after half a year and then she would watch the explosions like they were nothing more than fireworks.

Heo steadied her tone.

“Anyway, I think we’re going to do what we can here to look into our pasts. After all, I don’t want Team Leviathan to disband right after we joined. …But if we do find our pasts, Sayama really will reform the team, right? So we’ll do our best. And…”

“And?”

“I’m personally curious about it because my parents would have been there.”

“…”

“Those were the people who protected us, so I want to know what kind of battle they had. …I’m proud of my parents.”

“Yes, you can think about your parents that way, but make sure you don’t think that way about some of the people in UCAT now.”

“R-right. But even with them, the records show them seriously working on their jobs.”

“It would be kind of amazing if they were getting worked up over perverted things in the middle of battles.”

Then again, I’ve seen a few people who do exactly that, thought Shinjou, but she decided to keep it to herself.

At any rate, Heo had a lot of hopes for UCAT. Shinjou heard a lot of things she could not say herself and it made her happy.

There were a number of issues, but Heo was likely a suitable person for searching the past. Shinjou also wanted to know about that past battle, but she did not want to intrude because she did not even know about her parents.

And so she spoke.

“Okay, Heo. As your senior in Team Leviathan, I have something to tell you even though we disbanded: pursue the past. As someone who doesn’t know much about UCAT, your unique viewpoint will probably lead you to understand a lot we couldn’t. …And I bet a lot of people will let their guard down around a beautiful blonde girl.”

“I don’t think that last point was entirely necessary, but I’ll do my best!”

After a quiet snort, Heo spoke up again.

"Oh, but don't force yourself. You take your time in your search too."

"I will, and thank you for going along with that troublesome and twisted orator who loves riddles."

"Yes, and…I do want to become one of you."

"Eh? H-Heo, you already are one of us."

A bitter laugh answered Shinjou's frantic reply.

It was a self-deprecating laugh and Heo's voice followed.

"Thank you very much. That's all the more reason to think about all this. If Team Leviathan can reform, that's when we can truly become one of you. That's why I want to think about my parents, my great-grandfather, and…"

Shinjou heard the breath as Heo silently muttered another name.

"I want to do my best to pursue those people."

"Good, but remember to discuss it with Harakawa-kun and the others after you think about it, okay? Even if you find your own answer on your own, you can't find the answer to bring us all together without the others."

"Then we'll only get the true answer once you and Sayama return, right?"

Shinjou noticed a smile in the girl's tone.

She'll be fine, she decided before giving her parting words.

"Okay, then let's do our best. And take care of Kazami-san and Izumo-san."

She set down the receiver while realizing that true answer was more dependent on Kazami and Izumo recovering than on her and Sayama. The telephone card was ejected with a hole near the "ten remaining" spot.

…That was a pretty long conversation.

She looked out the window and saw the shadows of a giant mountain.

The train had entered a mountain range. According to the Japanese map she had seen in class, passing through these mountains would take them through Hakone and into Shizuoka. That would bring them closer to Toukai than Kantou.

The distance to Osaka and Sakai was shrinking.

…What's going to happen?

With that silent thought, her eyes turned to the darkness between the mountains.

She then realized that she had no one to discuss her thoughts with now that she had set down the phone and now that Sayama was not with her.

"…"

She held her trembling shoulders and started walking from the shop car.

She made her way to where her bed was.

If she slept, she could escape these feelings and doubts.

●

Quiet footsteps moved through a dimly-lit lobby.

The lobby's white walls and long waiting room seats were illuminated by emergency lights. Across from the seats was a long counter covered by a curtain.

Signs saying prescriptions, accounting, etc. lined the counter.

This was a hospital lobby.

The footsteps slowed to look at the signs on the counter.

The large window beyond the seats was meant to let in the sunlight, but it now reflected the one producing the footsteps.

A slender girl with short blonde hair walked west through the lobby.

She was moving toward the three people on the western end of the waiting room seats.

One was a girl with long blonde hair who sat in the seats.

Another was a boy with a red bandanna around his forehead who sat next to the other girl.

The last one was leaning against the column next to the seats.

"Harakawa, I just spoke with Shinjou. It sounds like she's going to continue on to Sakai. Um, uh…she doesn't want to leave behind any regrets."

"That's probably best for her. But, Heo Thunderson, the nuance of that that expression is a bit off."

"Eh?"

She tilted her head and stopped walking while the long-haired girl tapped on the shoulder of the boy next to her.

"Ryuuji-kun, are we leaving?"

However, it was not the boy who answered.

“Hiba is asleep, Mikage.”

Heo felt herself smile as she said that.

…Good.

A lot had happened that day, so she was glad and relieved that she could smile at least a little now that the night had arrived.

She saw Mikage tilt her head and poke Hiba’s cheek. After four pokes, the boy moved with his eyes closed. He lowered down, twisted around in annoyance, and generally moved like an inchworm.

“Ahh, M-Mikage-san. No…stop… The fish meat!!”

“Harakawa, there’s something I want to say and it’s threatening to dynamically burst out of me, but should I say it?”

“Don’t worry about it, Heo Thunderson. Worrying about it won’t fix him.”

“You’re probably right,” she said while Mikage further tilted her head.

“Ahh, Mikage-san. No, no. Don’t suck out the center of the fried egg!”

Heo was unsure what was so arousing about that, but for whatever reason, Hiba bent backwards, his back jumped up, and he fell behind the seat.

Ah, thought Heo just as she heard what sounded like a rock hitting the ground.

The dull sound reverberated throughout the empty lobby and Hiba’s legs trembled as they stuck up from the back of the seat.

Finally, he spoke from the floor.

“Ah! Wh-why am I in this pose? Wait, don’t tell me this isn’t the wall, but…the floor!? In that case…is this a concept attack!?”

“Hiba Ryuuji, I know you’re quite happy right now, but get up right this instant. That’s an order as your upperclassman.”

Hiba sat up on the white floor with a confused look, checked on his surroundings, and finally looked Mikage in the eye as she tilted her head.

“Did Shinjou-san say something?”

“Oh, um, she’s still going to Sakai. But, uh…”

Heo hesitated, but she decided to say it.

“Is your head okay?”

"O-of course it is! Just being in the blonde genre doesn't give you the right to be so rude! I'm surrounded by strange people and you might think I am too by association, but they haven't infected me yet!"

That's a lie, she declared in her heart with a full smile on her face.

…But if they haven't infected him 'yet', that means it's only a matter of time.

"Anyway, Kazami won't leave the hospital room, so how about we get going?"

As soon as she asked that, Heo saw a quick change on Hiba's face.

For just a split-second, his eyebrows lowered.

She knew what that meant. She knew all too well why they were here and what it meant to leave alone like this.

And Harakawa gave voice to that meaning.

"The treasurer won't leave the room and there's nothing we can do to help, so let's head home. …No, let's get to Hiba's grandfather's place like we planned. It's close to here and close to UCAT."

He crossed his arms and looked up at the white panels on the ceiling.

"The president was sedated with some drugs. I don't know the details about his arm, but I hear they're talking about constructing a prosthetic and his arm is supposedly fixed in place with some strange technique that won't actually heal it. …And the treasurer is looking after him even though he's asleep."

Heo felt Harakawa had intentionally chosen the phrase "looking after him".

He was being considerate to them and to Kazami, but in truth…

…She simply refuses to leave him.

When Heo and the others had arrived at the hospital about an hour earlier, Izumo was already being taken to the hospital room.

Heo had seen the bed carrying him to the individual room and she had seen Kazami. Kazami had been calling his name and shouting something else while clinging to the bed.

…And she was crying.

When they had left UCAT, Sibyl had just returned from rescuing

the two of them and she had informed them that Izumo's life was not in danger. She had noticed the concept space, left before anyone else, and intervened as Ikkou and Mitsuaki tried to attack.

That had been just after Izumo's arm had been smashed.

With a pale face devoid of expression, she had told them the following.

…I doubt there is anything you can do to help at the hospital.

She had to have seen Kazami crying even more than they had.

"…"

Heo remembered how Kazami had not even tried to look back at them.

She remembered Kazami calling Izumo's name as if to get him to notice her.

She remembered the trembling in Kazami's voice as she shouted "I'm sorry".

Kazami was safe and Izumo was injured because he had protected her.

It's a lot like when I lost my mother, thought Heo.

She remembered when that had happened, but how had it been compared to Kazami now?

Izumo had not lost his life, so were Kazami's cries…

…An overreaction?

Heo wondered that, but she shook her head. They were not an overreaction.

…It might just be that I'm overly emotionless.

Plus, it was not that Kazami had nearly lost Izumo.

…It was only pure luck that she didn't lose him.

With that in mind, the overlap between Heo and Kazami was being protected by someone important to them.

But Kazami had power while Heo had not.

Nevertheless, Kazami had been protected and someone important to her had lost a part of his body.

Why was she apologizing to Izumo even though he could not hear her?

…It's just like I used to be.

She was apologizing for a simple reason.

"To lighten the feeling of guilt."

"What are you muttering about, Heo Thunderson?"

"Eh?"

She looked up and realized the others were looking at her.

She frantically shook her hands back and forth and formed another smile.

"Oh, s-sorry. We're going to Hiba's grandfather's dojo, right?"

"That's right," said Hiba as he stood up with a smile.

Heo realized he too briefly looked up at the ceiling like Harakawa had.

She then walked past him as he took Mikage's hand and helped her to her feet.

Harakawa reacted to her footsteps by moving from the column and continuing on toward the hospital entrance.

She moved to his left and hesitated, but…

"…"

She took his left hand and held it tightly.

He received her grasp with a slight toughness and warmth, but that was all.

She looked up, but he did not turn back from his half step ahead of her.

She felt anything she said would be rejected at the moment, so she remained silent and tightened her grip on his hand.

…Now that I have the power of Thunder Fellow and my teammates in UCAT…

What did it mean for her to lose or partially lose someone important to her?

Part of her wanted to make sure she never knew, but another part thought about Kazami who now knew. It was because Kazami had power that she had apologized for allowing the damage.

…What's going to happen?

What would happen to Kazami and what would happen to Heo if she found herself in the same situation someday?

While thinking about that question with no answer, Heo realized something.

Harakawa's hand was squeezing back now.

"…"

She nodded and made sure Hiba and Mikage were following.

"Shouldn't we hurry? It's getting late, so Hiba's grandparents are probably already asleep."

“No, my grandfather stays up late. He likes to watch late-night shows without my grandmother knowing. I think today’s is Mountain Hermit Squadron Tengumen. It’s about a group of naked men with tengu masks on their crotches who destroy the evil of the world. They’ve lived in the mountains so long that they don’t know how society works and that’s used for social satire. Last time, Red was arrested after trying to get into the train station without buying a ticket, so this episode is about the others going to rescue him. The title is ‘Assault! Bring Tears to the Power of the State!’ ”

“I’m going to be staying in a house that gets that over the airwaves?”

Heo was worried now.

Suddenly, her grip on Harakawa’s hand felt him stop moving.

She looked up in confusion and saw him looking forward with a frown.

She followed his gaze and saw someone there.

“Wh-who are you!? Why do you have a black cat with you and bird on your head? Are you a friend of UCAT Director Ooshiro!?”

“I-I don’t think it’s possible to be more rude than that! I am 1st-Gear Inspector Brunhild Schild. I don’t believe I ever spoke with you properly even during the party after the 5th-Gear battle, but this is a good opportunity. Make sure you remember me, so you won’t be that rude ever again.”

Brunhild stood in the entrance with her arms crossed and faced the other four.

She then looked up at the ceiling along with the bird and cat.

“Is Kazami still feeling down?”

“Y-yes. She isn’t meeting with anyo-…”

“Hah. I’m not going to do that. Looking at a loser might infect me with their loser-ness. More importantly…”

To cut off any further comment on what she had said, Brunhild quickly pulled something from her pocket.

She held out a paper cylinder.

She flipped the cylinder around, grabbed it again, and pulled it open.

With the sound of escaping air, she pulled something out.

“A large photograph?”

“Siegfried found it while organizing the Kinugasa Library. After

the National Defense Department, the old Japanese UCAT was formed. This is a group photo during a trip taken to Kansai so their main force could get to know each other better.”

She spread it out in her right hand and revealed a black-and-white photograph of a mountain ridge somewhere.

The faded gray image showed a number of people in a row with the sky in the background.

“And Ooshiro gave me this.”

Brunhild picked up something lying at her feet.

She held out a wicker object with her left hand.

“It’s just a bucket, but look closer. You can kill some time with the creature in here.”

Heo saw something stand up on the edge of the bucket.

It was a small creature that resembled a boar.

Brunhild smiled and opened her mouth beyond the bucket.

“It’s Baku. He doesn’t seem to like me, so can one of you look after him?”

Chapter 9

“A Back that Watches Over”

A path forward and those travelling it are seen from behind
A path here and the one who travelled it cannot see themselves
Even a flower withers away without ever seeing itself

●

A factory was located in the mountains.

Despite the stains and shadows of age that showed up in the high contrast, the building looked innocent in the moonlight.

Two men stood on the dirt clearing in front of it.

One of them was a tall, skinny man exhaling white breaths. He had cloth wrapped around his head like a turban and his white breaths travelled a fair distance from his mouth.

“Hm, the mountains really are cold. Very cold indeed. And your breath is awfully white, manager.”

“That’s cigarette smoke, Hajji,” replied the old manager. “Anyway, are we really okay here?”

Hajji brought a hand to his mouth.

“Hm,” he said with a nod. “We should be. We should reach Japanese UCAT’s sixth basement after consuming eighty percent of our resources. And once we get there, the Concept Cores are ours for the taking. Yes, ours for the taking. Am I wrong? Hm?”

“Not what I meant. I was talking about our claim to righteousness.” The old manager blew smoke into the sky. “I’m helping you for a personal grudge. Plus, I like messing with machines. But I’ve never heard all that much about you, Hajji.”

The wind blew and the old manager’s smoke swirled into the sky and vanished. He raised the collar of his work outfit.

“Take this world’s war for example. In this country at least, the politicians settled everything. I got a family and my daughter has even graduated college. No one cares that I lost my family in that war or that I still can’t forget.”

“Our war isn’t over. Isn’t that the common point between us? Hm?”

“Then let’s stop talking about my example. …How has your war not ended?”

The old manager breathed smoke into the night sky.

The smoke thinned as it spread out and scattered.

“I have two questions, Hajji. You don’t have to answer and I’ll probably learn the answers at tomorrow’s confrontation anyway. The first is about your war. And the second…”

He asked his question.

“The second is about Mikoku, Shino, Tatsumi, and Alex’s war.”

“Why? Why would you want to ask about that? Hm?”

Hajji’s voice contained a hint of a smile and the old manager gave a brief answer while looking up into the sky.

“War is important to me.”

He let out a white sigh instead of smoke this time and the breath vanished into the sky.

“Sixty years. I’ve waited sixty years. Sixty years ago, someone died to save me. It might’ve been my mother, or my father, or my sister, or all of them. As I desperately worked to survive from then on, I would always wonder if my mother, my father, or my sister would’ve had an easier time surviving than a little kid like me. And I wondered why the one who had so much trouble just staying alive was the one to survive.”

“…”

“I’ve made a new family and had kids, but that doubt still hasn’t cleared. I haven’t died to save my kids and I don’t have the guts to die anyway. And even if I try to ask about it, this world is trying to put that war behind it. Sixty years. It’s been sixty years and now no one has seen the people who were with me back then and they all say we can never allow war to happen again.”

He continued to speak.

“The people who were with me died in war, but war was when I was with them. If we can never allow war to happen again, what does that mean for the precious time I spent with my family? What I’ve done for my kids is what I had done for me back then. I learned all of that through war. …So I want to start another war and see that war with my own eyes now that I’ve moved past where my mother, father, and sister were back then. That’s the only way to free myself from that war.”

All of his words vanished into the air.

Nothing remained in the night sky, but Hajji’s own words scattered to join it.

“My thoughts are best left unsaid, manager.”

“Thank you for listening so quietly, Hajji. If I told the younger ones this, it would turn into a lecture. But you’re different, aren’t you? Is your war and Mikoku and Shino’s war the same as mine?”

“Mine isn’t,” answered Hajji quietly. “No, mine isn’t.”

The old manager looked down from the sky and to the side.

He saw Hajji holding out a hand.

The old manager pulled out a cigarette and lit it with the on in his mouth.

“These are strong.”

Hajji inhaled without nodding, bit down on the smoke with his teeth, and let it seep out of his mouth.

“I’m thankful. Yes, so very thankful.”

“For what?”

“Everything, manager. Isn’t that right? Hm?”

With that question, Hajji suddenly looked into the sky.

He stuck a hand in his pocket and spoke through the smoke leaving his mouth.

“Let me tell you a story from a long, long time ago, manager.”

Smoke whiter than his breath formed in the sky.

“Long ago, there was a wonderful world. It was a land of desert lit by the two extremes of fire and shadow, but it was filled with heat phenomena concepts and it interacted with the other worlds quite a bit. That world supplied the other worlds with power and the calculations needed to use that power. But once the Concept War began, it was the first to be targeted. The other worlds both feared and desired its technology and knowledge,” explained Hajji. “So that world’s politicians tried to destroy the other worlds. But the king and general had a thought. What if, instead of destroying the other worlds, they gathered all the concepts in their own world, invited in the residents of those other worlds, and created the ultimate world? To accomplish that, they created a giant mechanical dragon with the ability to construct a world. But…”

“But?”

Hajji briefly stopped at the old manager’s question.

After a moment, he placed a hand over his mouth with the cigarette between his fingers and turned around.

He smiled with the ends of his eyebrows lowered.

“I’m talking too much, aren’t I? What do you think? Hm?”

“This is fine every so often. It all ends tomorrow. Both our strange relationship and this world, that is.”

“I see,” said Hajji with a resigned sigh.

He took a step in front of the old manager’s gaze and hid his

expression from the man.

"The king promised to marry the general's sister and went out to battle in celebration. It was a joint battle with 3rd. But that's where the betrayal began. The politicians betrayed the king and he died unable to return from the lowest world. The general had returned ahead of time, but he was captured by the politicians and his sister, the king's promised queen…"

"What happened to the queen? I'll listen, so tell me, Hajji."

"Sure. The politicians used her as the final component in the modified mechanical dragon. She was used as the core of the world-destroying mechanical dragon."

He took a breath.

"The general resolved himself then and began attacking the other worlds, but people from the lowest Gear appeared to stop him. One of those enemies attacked the general, but they both only lost an eye and the general's sister was destroyed…along with the world."

He laughed and a white breath not made of smoke entered the air.

The wind had settled down at some point, so the white breath simply spread out into the night sky like it had been thrown.

Below it, the old manager spoke.

"Who is that enemy of yours?"

"The old UCAT member charged with 9th-Gear: current UCAT Field Operations Director Abram Mesam. He is the man who killed my sister Shahrnavaz while she was the great mechanical dragon Zahhak. And yet I hear he later married and has lived a happy life. That is my war, manager."

He took a step in front of the manager and shrugged his shoulders.

After a pause, Hajji's shoulders lowered.

"Ridiculous, isn't it? I talk so much about concepts and the fate of the world, but it all comes back to a grudge over losing a precious friend and relative. Don't you think? Hm?"

"If that's ridiculous, then mine's even cheaper. But…"

"But?"

"I take it you aren't planning to say anything about Mikoku, Shino, Tatsumi, and Alex's war. How far are you going to carry their war while sacrificing your own past, Hajji?"

Hajji's back did not immediately reply.

A few streams of cigarette smoke filled the air before he finally spoke.

"Their war is something only those four should have anything to do with, manager. They were supposed to save those of us who had nowhere to go and then fight another war. However, they never had the chance. We were so useless that we could only just barely manage to carry them away from Osaka back then. We were lucky we even got Tatsumi back after she was taken away."

He continued.

"And we never did get Shinjou Sadagiri back."

"Hm? That's one of the girls on Team Leviathan, isn't it? Why her?"

"Her mother understood us but also rejected us. Yes. …And, manager, let me give you one other piece of information."

Hajji turned around with the hand holding his cigarette hiding the smile on his lips.

"Those four have absolute righteousness on their side. Theirs is so much deeper and broader than ours. But this world crushed it during that Great Kansai Earthquake. On tomorrow's battlefield, I will reveal that perfect righteousness and where exactly those four's war lies."

"Does righteousness like that even exist? After the Concept War, we can only be talking about events inside Low-Gear, right? Is there really a righteousness that can convince the other unrelated Gears?"

"There is. We have a legitimate reason to make Low-Gear ours."

Hajji took the cigarette from his mouth and flicked it into the air.

"Funny, isn't it? Even as we prepare to attack with our perfect righteousness, UCAT is splitting apart. Team Leviathan has disbanded for some reason, their negotiators are scattering, and some of them are even being targeted by the bearers of 7th-Gear's Concept Core."

"By 7th-Gear?"

"Yes." Hajji nodded, lowered his gaze, and smiled toward the old manager. "It's interesting that the bearers of evil would be worn down now. It's like this world is accepting our righteousness. Don't you think? Hm?"

●

A dark room was filled with silence.

The walls, ceiling, and bed by the window were all white, but they had all sunk into the darkness of the night.

The scene outside the window was a little high because this was the second floor.

The room was as dark as some watery depths and even the moonlight did not make it far past the window.

A single chair sat on the dark side of that borderline between darkness and moonlight.

A girl sat in that simple pipe stool.

It was Kazami.

She looked at what lay in the bed in front of her.

Izumo's head stuck out from the top of the blanket.

His right arm was also exposed and it was attached to the IV stand next to the bed. The large IV pack still had about a third of its contents and the drops were dripping down the tube.

Izumo was asleep.

Kazami looked to where his left arm was under the blanket, but the blanket did not rise up as it should.

"I'm sorry."

She looked down at her own feet. Her hair swayed and she did not bother brushing it away from her face.

"It should have been me."

She rested the side of her head on the bed.

Her eyes looked up at Izumo's face and she saw two objects standing next to the bed.

Those two objects were weapons.

Normally, they would have been a large sword and spear both measuring around two meters long, but they were shorter now that their cowlings had been destroyed.

Barely any of the white armor remained, the internal frames had split, and some fragments had twisted until they stuck out.

The steel protective cylinder was visible in both of them.

When Kazami thought about how both of those contained a Concept Core, she averted her gaze.

…At the very least, I have no right to wield them.

G-Sp2 had likely been hesitant to enter that battlefield of no mutual understanding.

She had treated it like a weapon with no attempt to assuage its fears and she had ended up breaking it.

"I'm sorry."

Right after Izumo had been injured, Sibyl had arrived and Ikkou and Mitsuaki had fled.

She had thought the development department had retrieved G-Sp2 and V-Sw, but for some reason, they were here.

…They must think they're ours.

She did not know for sure, but to her, all of the broken things in this room felt like her fault. It felt like they had been left here as a lesson for her.

"…"

No, she thought.

A number of things bothered her.

…What if Kaku and I had gone to UCAT earlier without stopping at my house?

What if they had taken a different route to UCAT?

"What if…what if Sayama hadn't had Team Leviathan disband and we'd all been together?"

She muttered those words while thinking "I'm the worst".

Just as with G-Sp2's destruction, all the fault lay with her because she had been the one there.

She tried to bury her forehead in the blanket.

She pressed her mouth against the blanket and asked a question to the boy beyond it.

"Why?"

She took a breath.

"Why was I left unharmed?"

Their strength in battle seemed equal, but his was actually greater. After all, he had his constant defensive power. That was different from her ability to fly with X-Wi.

He was also the only son of IAI's president while she was the only daughter of a normal household.

She did not believe in judging people's "worth", but when thinking about usefulness and position, who was needed on the concept battlefield and in IAI?

“It isn’t me, is it?”

With that question, she inhaled to take in his warmth through the blanket.

No, she shrunk down and clenched her fists on her lap.

“I don’t want that…”

She remembered when she had snapped at Sayama about disbanding and yet he had ordered her to represent them.

She had been so forceful then, but not anymore.

She sighed and the long, heavy breath fell to the floor.

“?”

She heard a sound from outside the window. People were speaking down below.

Wondering who it was, she got up.

“Ah.”

She had been in the same position for so long that she wobbled when turning around.

She grabbed the windowsill to keep herself from falling.

At the same time, she saw five people in the hospital parking lot down below.

Harakawa, Heo, Hiba, and Mikage were leaving the hospital entrance.

“And Brunhild too.”

Was I worrying them, she wondered, but that only made her feel worse.

She noticed Hiba and Harakawa were not starting up their motorcycles.

Heo tilted her head at that and Harakawa pointed at the driver’s seat.

He taught her how to use the clutch and pushed the sidecar and back seat from behind.

They were likely trying not to disturb the hospital with the loud sound of the engine.

Hiba was doing the same. He sat Mikage in the driver’s seat, taught her how to control it, and also stroked her butt in the process, but that did not matter.

Brunhild and her cat continued ahead on foot, but…

“…?”

Hiba said something and Brunhild turned around with a frown. He

had likely pointed out she did not know the way to his grandfather's place.

Brunhild took a step back and the five of them left in a row.

As Kazami watched them, she gave a small nod.

…They can get by without me.

As soon as she thought that, Heo turned back with Baku on her head.

She turned toward Kazami.

"——————!"

Kazami instinctually bent out of the way, but Heo's gaze did not immediately reach her.

Heo was not entirely sure where the hospital room was.

"…?"

Kazami sighed and stepped back as Heo lowered her eyebrows and clearly began counting windows from the edge of the building.

Finally, her gaze reached the right window.

"…"

She tilted her head while peering in.

Kazami wondered if she could see her, but the principle of reflection would prevent Heo from seeing Kazami from the moonlit parking lot, even though Kazami could see her.

Nodding at that fact, Kazami spoke quietly.

"I'm sorry."

She took another step back to the chair and that place surrounded by broken things.

But just before she did, she saw Heo grow careless in her control of the motorcycle and crash into Hiba's motorcycle.

Kazami heard a faint collision but did not watch any longer.

Harakawa had likely gotten mad at her.

…At least they have the energy for that.

If they were safe and they could smile cheerfully, that was all that mattered. She had messed that up for herself.

She sat in the chair alone but lifted her right leg to her chest and wrapped her arms around it. That allowed her to sense the presence of her own body and she slowly sighed.

She looked at G-Sp2 and V-Sw which were placed broken before her and at Izumo who would not open his eyes.

"Why did I escape unharmed?"

She closed her eyes, wrinkled her brow, lowered her head, and clenched her teeth as the words escaped.

She had one thing on her mind.

If Team Leviathan had been whole, would this still have happened?

“Sayama.”

She spoke about what he had said.

“You told me to search for my past, but I’m different from the rest of you. I can’t do that.”

Chapter 10

“Sounds of a Visitor”

Come
For I have called for you
For my very being is calling for you

●

The color of the night sky began to change.

The bottom of the sky to the east was growing bright.

The entire eastern sky was already lit by something rising from below the horizon, so some purple was spreading like a wave.

The sky's color change was the preparation or foreshadowing of the breaking dawn.

The air remained still and did not produce any mist.

The final night dew sank down, but that was all.

The faint light from the east revealed the silhouette of the land.

The shadows were formed by a forest.

A mountain was filled with darkness, a valley was steeped in the color black, and a narrow yet swift river could be heard flowing between them, but trees covered it all and hid them.

The thick and massive mountains and forests were nothing but trees and slopes.

Nothing moved in this predawn hour. The nocturnal animals had sensed the morning and gone to sleep, but the diurnal animals had yet to wake.

Nevertheless, something did move through those mountains and forest.

It was a boy in a suit with a rucksack on his back.

It was Sayama.

He walked up on a mountain ridge while moving through the forest at running speed.

There was a path there. The wind and rain had naturally worn down the dirt on the ridge, so stone footing had been exposed. A mountain path along the ridge used that footing.

The Okutama mountain range was vast, but a path ran along that ridge of the primary mountains. It was currently just before November, so Okutama was approaching winter. To maintain the power lines, water pipes, and other utilities running along the ridge, people had travelled on the side paths straying from the ridge and the unnecessary underbrush had been cut away.

Sayama had travelled through most of these places back when he had been training, but his current goal was even higher.

…A little to the north.

Mount Kumotori, Tokyo's tallest mountain at approximately two thousand meters, was to the west. He was about seven kilometers east of it after climbing to Nippara from the south.

His destination was near Nikengoya Ridge northeast of Mount Kumotori.

If he used the hiking trail to Kumotori, it would take about half a day.

He had entered from the Ootaki mountain trail to the far west, but he had considered taking a more direct route from a more remote trail.

Most notably, he could have reached the base of Kumotori by road if he had circled around to the Saitama side.

However, he had decided against that.

He was familiar with tall mountains.

He had only climbed the Tokyo mountains of Akigwawa or Okutama, but even then, he could still come down with mild altitude sickness if he climbed a two thousand meter mountain deep in the Okutama mountain range with no preparation.

If he rested with proper posture, he could recover from altitude sickness, but that would prevent him from moving much for an entire day.

Climbing the mountain would be simple, but when thinking about the descent and what came after that, he decided not to rush things.

Travelling along the Nippara mountainside added several kilometers to his journey, but it also allowed him fuller breaths and the amount of oxygen in his blood gradually changed as he walked and took brief breaks.

This is perfect, he told himself in the dark forest.

"Long ago…"

…I climbed a mountain without this planning or consideration for altitude sickness.

That had been during his training days.

As part of that training, Hiba Ryuutetsu had chased him around with a large machete for three days. He had rushed up the mountain then, but that had kept him from moving the following day.

Afraid of an attack during that time, he had set a trap.

It had been a popular variety of trap.

When someone approached, a rope would wrap around their neck

and lift them into the air.

For bait, he had used a porn magazine found in a Mount Kumotori cabin. He had doubted it would work, but only three hours later, it had caught Ryuutetsu and the old man had swayed back and forth while struggling.

Sayama distinctly remembered the heart-to-heart conversation between teacher and student then.

“M-Mikoto, you’ll pay for this one! I wouldn’t walk anywhere near a cliff if I were you!!”

“Ha ha ha. I filled this area with the scent of raw meat, so try to rest in peace once a bear eats you. Is that what you call a bear-ial? But do not worry. I will tell Toshi-kun that you were bravely eaten by a bear.”

It had been a conversation of mutual consideration. His preparations for luring in a bear had been flawless, but Ryuutetsu had beaten him back to the dojo and dinner had been a pot of some strange tough meat.

Thinking back, he decided he should have finished the man off himself instead of leaving it to something else. *That naivety led to the loss of a piece of nature,* he realized. *I need to treat nature more carefully.*

“This is that same tree.”

He stopped below a familiar tree. The thick tree that towered above him in the darkness was the one he had once hung Ryuutetsu from. The rope was probably still there up above.

It is all so nostalgic, he thought just before a sound came from his pocket.

It was an electronic tone, but it did not come from his cellphone. He had left his phone and wristwatch in his dorm room after having Team Leviathan disband. The sound in his pocket came from the timer on a pocket watch.

He checked it and found the glow-in-the-dark paint on the hands pointing to five o’clock in the morning. The LCD screen at the bottom indicated half an hour had passed.

…Time for a break.

“And given the time, I should eat an early breakfast.”

He nodded and came to a stop.

He sat below the old hanging tree and lowered his rucksack.

The most noticeable item in the bag was his change of clothes. A mountain-climbing suit and underwear were folded and placed inside. Next was two liters' worth of water bottles, but he also had a straw-shaped filtration device because that was not enough water for this trip.

He thought while pulling out and eating some portable food and drinking some water from a bottle.

…I would normally still be asleep at this time.

The watch said it was 5:10. In another hour, Shinjou would wake him or he would wake her.

…Have I really been living such a happy life for more than half a year now?

He had not had that before. He had always gone to sleep alone and woken alone.

That solitary lifestyle had returned to him here.

"It feels so lonely, Shinjou-kun."

He suddenly stood up.

The eastern sky had grown a little brighter and he could see the next mountain range from the ridge.

He placed his hands around his mouth.

"Shinjou-kuuuuun!!"

After a few seconds, his shout returned to him.

"Shinjou-kuuuuun."

He focused his ears on the echo and nodded several times. Okutama's nature also desired Shinjou.

For that reason, he pulled a portable digital recorder from his pocket and pointed it toward the dimly-lit Okutama mountains.

"Ah! N-no, stop! Don't touch my butt! Don't pull down my underwear! My butt!"

He placed a hand next to his ear and waited the few seconds for the reply.

"Ah. N-no, stop. Don't touch my butt. Don't pull down my underwear. My butt."

The echo returned in a milder form.

…Such deep meaning.

Can you hear this, mountain trees, the earth, and all of nature? This is what I once did not have.

Nodding at that, he sat back down.

“But what I have with me now is not the real deal. And that includes myself. That is why I am taking this solitary journey and why I have given myself an assignment. …I will make myself the real deal.”

He shallowly closed his eyes and thought of an important person.

He then brought his right hand to his chest and muttered to himself.

“Around ten years ago, I lost my father and was almost killed by my mother.”

He frowned and strength gathered in the hand on his chest.

The usual pain filled the depths of his chest there.

The pain seemed to disturb all of the blood circulating his body. He had not felt this definite pain for a while, but…

“…”

He took a deep breath and forced it down.

He gently raised his left hand and spread his fingers in front of his face.

“I trained my body in order to sweep away that past, but this broken left fist…while it can hold a weapon, I unfortunately still cannot clench it into a fist, Shinjou-kun.”

He smiled bitterly.

He swung his left fist toward the tree behind him.

“…”

But without him telling it to, the fist slowed down and stopped before reaching the tree trunk.

On a subconscious level, he feared that phantom pain.

He sent a bitter laugh into the sky.

“How pathetic. Shinjou-kun, you understand the issue in your body and are attempting to mature, but I am simply dragging around my chest pains and left fist without changing a thing.”

He then muttered a rejection of that.

“No, this is my only chance. After all, you are sure to find something in Sakai. And whether you find success or failure, you will continue forward. If I am to be the one to accept you back, I must reach that same level. …And this is my only chance. I am alone now, so I can settle my past without worrying anyone else.”

He carved those words into his heart.

…I will pursue my parents’ footsteps.

He told himself he would no longer look away from the truth. He could not afford to do so anymore.

It was necessary for the Leviathan Road.

It was necessary to no longer fear his own pain.

It was necessary to reach the same level as the one he cared for.

…It is necessary for everything about me. And…

"And this is how I will gain my past. …But what about Kazami and the others? Will they be able to use the past to rethink their current selves?"

He opened his eyes and faced forward.

At some point, the sky had grown very bright. With the darkness gone…

"Questioning myself like this feels rather embarrassing."

He smiled bitterly and the smile only grew.

Why was I speaking to myself for so long? he wondered.

…I used to be much better at restraining myself when I was alone.

"I have grown weak," he muttered happily. "I have grown weak, Shinjou-kun. After meeting you and living with you, I have grown weak. I have simply been hiding it from you…no, you have simply not tried to notice it."

He put away his things and placed the bag on his back, but brought a hand to his chest.

He thought of the past as he faced eastward. He could no longer see anything but mountains in the distance.

…It was in an unseen place beyond those mountains that my mother almost killed me.

He thought along with the pain in his chest.

…Why do I feel this pain?

"That is a simple matter."

He recalled something. It was the same thing he had recalled to escape Atsuta's Art of Walking when battling 2nd-Gear.

Long ago, his family had been whole and had smiled.

His father had been very reliable and his mother had been kind and gentle.

He had not shared this memory with anyone since losing them.

…Why?

Why did you die?

Why am I still alive?

He did not need to worry about it. He was happy now and there was no need to question that happiness.

But the reason for his chest pains and the phantom pain in his fist was there.

…Why?

He had asked himself that a long time ago. Since Shinjou had arrived and since he had grown serious, he had hidden that question, but he stood with it in his heart once more. He held his chest and frowned.

"I will go find the answer. Father, mother, I will follow after you, surpass your unseen forms, and continue on with only a quick glance toward you. And wait for me, Shinjou-kun. I want to be with you again, but only after I can survive without you. If I can do that…"

He held his chest as he began to walk once more.

"The world's greatest happiness will be mine."

●

The world was broken.

The night sky blazed red and a city crumbled and burned.

Something walked along a wide road in the collapsing city that sent sprays of fire into the air.

It was someone with no form. It was nothing but a gaze.

The gaze weakly climbed the tilted asphalt and reached the peak.

"…Eh?"

Only then did the gaze realize it was in a burning city.

"Eh? W-wait. Um, when did I end up here? All I did was secretly strip naked in the futon and go to sleep. Don't tell me that made me turn invisible."

Heo, the owner of the gaze, quickly looked in every direction.

However, her wandering gaze stopped when it spotted something in the scenery: a collapsed traffic light.

The traffic light's base had crumbled when the asphalt had tilted and its lights had gone dark, but the sign below it gave the place name.

"Osaka Castle?"

She faced forward.

A building was gently tilted toward the broken road Heo stood on.

Beyond it were the remnants of an elevated roadway and a river.

Beyond those was a small mountain.

The mountain was formed from the accumulated rubble of a collapsed structure.

It was dark and cracked and the light of a fire leaked out from within.

That was when Heo first felt the wind.

It felt more like a scorching rush of air than a hot wind.

As the racing wave of heat washed over the trees lining the street, their leaves instantly turned to ash.

Even the metal street signs, store signs, and traffic lights instantly lost their paint and bent like melting hard candy.

…What is this?

It was the hot gusts of wind produced in a disaster-stricken city.

Heo then realized what exactly she was seeing.

…The Great Kansai Earthquake.

This was thanks to Baku. The small creature had taken a liking to her at the hospital before arriving at Hiba's dojo and he was showing her an image of the past.

The night after the Black Sun battle, Heo had seen her great-grandfather's past in a dream.

This is the second time, she realized while looking around.

She saw a mountain and sea of destruction and it all matched what Sayama had described.

Her father had died here and so had Harakawa, Hiba, and Sayama's fathers.

They were likely the reason she was having this dream. The night before, they had looked at the photograph of her great-grandfather and the others that Brunhild had brought. Mikage's mother had also been in the photo and they had discussed it.

The photograph had contained a few dozen people in front of a mountain range. In addition to the main force of old UCAT, it seemed to include their families and the people with normal posts as well. They had not known who anyone was outside of Chao and their own relatives, so they had been forced to discuss it and use the process of elimination.

The man with pale hair in the very front had been Hiba's grandfather. Next to him was Hiba's grandmother Toshi and next to

her was Thunderson. The man in a military uniform on the left of the back row had been Sayama's grandfather. To the right from there had been Chao, a man who was probably Izumo's grandfather, and then Ooshiro's father. There were a few Arabs in the photo, but they had concluded Abram was the biggest one and not the man who looked more like a doctor or a cook.

Behind them all, a man had been sitting alone on a raised tree branch and facing the mountain range in the background. The hair on the back of his head suggested he was an old man and his left arm had been missing.

…That was Professor Kinugasa Tenkyou.

She wondered what kind of person he had been and Sayama was currently working toward that answer.

They were simply seeing an image of him cut out of the past.

It was likely their thoughts then that had led Baku to show her the past now.

But she belatedly began to worry about Harakawa.

None of his relatives had been in the photo and he had remained silent the night before.

Sayama had said to search for their pasts…

…But what about Harakawa?

He said nothing about his relatives. He never said what had happened with his father or grandfather.

However, his father's grave was near her father's and his father had also died in the secondary damages of the Great Kansai Earthquake.

…He's the same.

Heo nodded in her heart.

"Sayama said he saw his parents and some others entering the city."

In that case…

"Were my father and Harakawa's father there too?"

As soon as she asked that, someone suddenly appeared next to her.

A man landed on the top of the tilted asphalt with such force that she was afraid they would collide.

He had a medium build, he wore a combat vest, and his long black hair blew in the wind. He wore a Japanese sword scabbard on his

back and held a drawn Japanese-style Cowling Sword in his hand.

He had laughter on his lips and he let out a shout while looking around.

“Ha ha ha! If you’re a man, then come at me! If you can take me on, I’ll admit you’re powerful!!”

Speed fell upon the surrounding area in response.

Five figures appeared after apparently jumping down from the surrounding collapsed buildings. They maintained a distance of ten meters while forming a circle around the man.

All of their black leather combat coats swelled out to an odd extent and they held blades that resembled machetes and were over a meter long.

They had artificial bodies and wielded cowling blades.

The man looked across the five men who looked up from below the raised asphalt.

“So the challengers look up at the ruler from below, hm? Then let me tell you something: a true man does not look up at or down on anyone.”

The man had been standing next to Heo, but the next thing she knew, he had leaped toward one of the artificial body soldiers in front of him.

She heard him speak as he did so.

“I’ll do this head-on. The position of the Five Great Peaks may have been quickly created just for this battle, but I’ll fulfill my role. I’m the temporary manager of Japanese UCAT’s Independent Action Division. The name’s Hiba Ryuuichi.”

That name surprised Heo.

…Eh?

Once her confusion caught up with the facts before her eyes, Ryuuichi was already rushing toward another soldier to the right.

Her vision could not keep up. All she managed was seeing the first man Ryuuichi leaped toward suddenly fall to his knees.

That first man collapsed almost without warning.

Ryuuichi then tried to hit the man to the right with a backhand sword strike, but the four remaining men, including the one being attacked, took action.

The targeted one intercepted while the other three chose to attack.

Ryuuichi's target ran right to put some distance between them and swung up the machete in his right hand. The mechanically-enhanced arm lifted the flat blade to slice Ryuuichi's body in two from below.

The remaining three used the rising asphalt in the center as cover and prepared their left arms.

Thick metal tubes protruded from below their hands. The caliber looked the same as a machinegun.

…Are they going to defeat their enemy without worrying about the one being targeted!?

That meant their enemy was worth enough to sacrifice one of their own.

However, Ryuuichi still took a step toward the artificial body soldier swinging the large machete.

He moved to cut down the man. Even if he dodged the blade, the bullets were coming, so Heo gasped.

But with a carefree voice, Ryuuichi placed a foot up on the machete blade.

"Eh?"

Heo watched the movements of his feet.

…It's like he's climbing a staircase.

He placed his feet on the quickly rising blade, his hips floated up, and he lifted his body.

The blade was moving too quickly for Heo to see, but Ryuuichi's movements looked awfully slow.

He stood on top of the rising blade.

He caught its strength, shrunk down his body as the blade rose, and…

"!"

The other three men began to fire once they realized what Ryuuichi was doing.

The bullets flew, but the mechanical arm raising the machete was faster.

A moment later, Hiba Ryuuichi used the momentum of the machete to leap back toward the other three.

He flipped through the air above the flying bullets, gunshots, Heo's consciousness, the three men trying to raise their guns, and everything else.

The artificial body soldier with the machete was struck by his comrades' bullets and was blown away.

However, Heo tried to view all of Ryuuichi's actions this time. She looked up, turned around, looked down, and saw the man's long hair flowing behind him as if in the wind.

He landed behind the other three. They were in a line and he was behind the farthest left one from Heo's perspective.

That leftmost artificial body soldier turned to the right and threw a backhand blow with the machete in his right hand.

The central soldier responded by leaping backwards while making a similar backhand blow with the blade in his right hand.

The rotating backhands approached Ryuuichi from either side.

Then, the rightmost soldier made an attack to make absolutely sure. He spun around and fired his machinegun between the other two attacks.

The sound of slicing wind mixed with gunfire.

…There's no way he can avoid this!

But Ryuuichi reacted to it all.

He had his back to Heo and thick blades were arriving from his front left and back right.

As he stood up after his leap, he suddenly threw his body to the left.

"…!?"

Heo just about cried out that he was going to be hit, but his movement changed once he arrived right next to the arriving blade.

He slipped to the right in order to jump over the blade on that side.

…Oh.

She understood the idea behind his evasive action.

In the intersection between the two blades, there was nowhere to evade.

But if he moved toward one or the other, a gap would open up.

By using that gap as space to move and by buying some time before the blades met, he could jump over and evade the right blade.

However, the created space was less than ten centimeters.

And that was not the only problem. The blade would try to move into the opened space.

…So he has to move even faster than the blade.

Beyond Heo's unease, Ryuuichi's body spun around.

He flipped quickly to the right without ever placing his hands on the ground.

He used the height difference between the two blades to twist his flipping body through.

A few tufts of hair were cut away and the bottom of his combat vest was split.

…His flip isn't strong enough.

His body was slipping through, but he wasn't rotating quickly enough.

Knowing he would be cut in two, Heo tried to close her vision even though she had no eyelids.

But in that instant, Ryuuichi placed a hand on the left blade even as he flipped.

He caught its strength and gently wrapped his palm around the blade.

"!!"

He quickly rotated over the right blade and shot away from the left blade.

He made it through.

"Wow," said the voice of Heo's consciousness.

…But the machinegun.

The bullets were still coming.

He has no way to avoid them, she thought.

Immediately afterwards, she heard his voice.

"Don't make me go to so much trouble!!"

He swung his sword horizontally as he landed from his side flip and he rotated his body as he did so.

However, he lacked the necessary reach. The sword's blade was long but not long enough to reach his three enemies.

Nevertheless, the attack reached them.

"!?"

Light raced along the path of the sword. The pale light shot through the air like a swift wave.

…It even reached the roadway and surrounding buildings!?

The elevated roadway's supporting columns were nearly five meters thick and the buildings over twenty stories tall, but the

horizontal cut ran straight through them.

The sound of an explosion rang out.

The men with artificial bodies had their torsos cut through at the waist and the buildings were sliced through as easily as tofu.

The elevated roadway slid down from above the cut and the buildings collapsed as if sinking inwards.

The reverberating sound resembled a waterfall.

Everywhere the cut had reached crumbled in the same way.

And by that time, Ryuuichi had already sheathed the sword on his back.

He had won.

He raised his head while surrounded by the sounds of buildings crumbling to the ground, of scattering metal fragments, and of motors racing fruitlessly.

“You did a good job, Tsukuyomi Arihito.”

But even after the man had overwhelmed his enemies, Heo saw him frown and looked up into the sky.

…*What is he looking at?*

She looked up as well, but she saw something else first.

“Ah.”

It was a blue mechanical dragon.

It resembled American UCAT’s mechanical dragons, but it was a little different. The shapes of the components were not quite as streamlined and she could sense its age.

The dragon wrapped wind around itself and passed by at extreme low altitude in a split-second.

It was moving quickly, but Heo saw a certain image as strongly as if it had been burned into her retinas. She saw the person sitting in the cockpit.

It was a man wearing a blue armored uniform.

“Dad!?”

After it passed by, she turned to see it shaking its tail.

The sky reflected the burning color of the city and the blue dragon grew more distant. And as if pursuing that dragon, a group of gray mechanical dragons flew up from the shadows of the burning city.

Heo saw the blue dragon tear through the sky in a rising arc. The gray dragons descended in an opposite arc and they crossed paths

in an instant.

“————————”

The gray dragons became blooming flowers of red light in the sky.

Repeated explosions rumbled like distant thunder, but new gray dragons ascended to pursue the blue one.

That was when Heo saw the stars in the sky.

…Eh?

She realized she had not seen those stars until now.

The fire may have been creating thick clouds in the sky because there was a clear division between where the stars were visible and where they were not. Heo’s attention was entirely stolen by those stars that seemed horribly out of place.

…And yet I didn’t even see them before.

She tried to look up into the sky, but that was all she managed.

She realized the surrounding scenery was twisting and growing dark.

The past was ending.

Realizing that, she tried to gather her thoughts on what she had seen.

“So was my dad fighting in a mechanical dragon?”

…Why? What was he fighting for?

She only knew that a battle had occurred in Osaka on the night of the earthquake and that her father had died there.

Sayama had said that battle was likely fought with the group that preceded the Army.

…Then why was this hidden?

There was no one there to answer that question, so her mind fell into the darkness without knowing.

She was waking from the past.

●

Heo sprang up from her futon.

“…!?”

The scene entering her eyes was too incongruous with what she had seen a moment before.

She was in a dimly-lit room.

…This is a room in Hiba’s grandfather’s house.

She saw Mikage curled up in a futon, Brunhild sleeping in a

yukata with her futon pushed off of her, and a basket sitting by her own pillow.

When she saw the small creature sleeping on its back in the basket, Heo came to her senses.

She felt her pulse race through her entire body and she trembled.

She remembered a certain fact concerning Baku: other people would see the past he showed you.

…Harakawa!

He was sleeping in the neighboring boys room. If she opened the sliding screen dividing the rooms, she would find him.

She wanted to hear his opinion and she wanted to compare her thoughts with his, so she jumped from her futon, opened the screen, and entered the next room.

The identically shaped room contained two futons. Her impatient mind realized it was so dark because the storm shutter was closed, but that was all she noticed.

"Harakawa!"

Someone sat up within one of the futons.

It was Harakawa. He pulled a hand from his yukata pocket, placed it on his chin, and turned a puzzled look her way.

"Heo Thunderson, what are you-…"

She relaxed a little when their eyes met.

She almost leaped toward him as she ran the short distance and climbed on top of his pushed back blanket.

The shock and unease from her dream produced a series of words from her mouth.

"U-um, it happened again while I was asleep. It was the second time and I thought I was used to it, but I tried to cry out but couldn't and, um, everything was so hot and falling apart, so…um…"

"Stop confessing whatever nonsensical dream you head and calm down, Heo Thunderson."

She felt his hand in the hair on the back of her head. He almost seemed to grab her scalp as he pressed her face into his chest.

…Ah.

It surprised her, but she also managed to calm down.

She smiled a little as the blanket tickled her skin and she took a deep breath to calm down further. The past she had seen played back in her head.

…That was…

Her father and the others had been fighting.

Despite her close connection to the man she had seen, she did not know why, she did not know who else had been there, and she did not know what had led to all that. All she knew was what Sayama had said.

…UCAT fought a battle during the Great Kansai Earthquake.

"What does it all mean?"

"I don't know either, Heo Thunderson. After all, I'm a newcomer. And so are you. Also, don't make so much noise. You'll wake Hiba."

"Eh?"

She looked to the other futon and saw Hiba wiggling back in forth inside it.

"Nnn, ahhh! The car! The car! It's so round!!"

"Harakawa, he's repeating a joke and he's become completely unintelligible."

"Don't nitpick how other people's brains work, Heo Thunderson. Also…"

She felt his hand loosen on her head, so she looked up and found his eyes right in front of her.

She tilted her head at close range.

"What is it?"

"Look behind you for a second."

She twisted her shoulders and turned her head backwards as instructed.

終わりのプロローグ

Confused, she saw Harakawa's futon blanket and something skin-colored and round on top of it.

She tried to figure out what that was.

"A butt?"

"That's exactly right, but why are you naked, Heo Thunderson?"

Once he pointed it out, she realized she was indeed naked.

The phrase "how could you?" reached her mind before the phrase "what have I done?".

"————!"

She gave a wordless scream and grabbed a nearby object to hide herself. That object happened to be the blanket covering Harakawa.

But that meant…

"Hey, wait. Don't climb into my futon!"

"B-but you'll see me naked! I'm unprotected!"

She hid between Harakawa and the blanket as if clinging to his body and she looked up at him.

He frowned as he lay below her with their bodies almost overlapping.

"What's the point of hiding?"

"S-sorry, but can I borrow this blanket to go to the next room?"

"And leave me in the cold?"

"U-um, then I'll, uh, warm you up myself."

"Think about what the words mean before you use them, Heo Thunderson."

Heo hung her head and nodded.

He sighed.

"Well, just get going. It sounds like Hiba's still in his disturbing dream world, so I don't think he's noticed."

"S-sorry. I'll find a way to think you later."

"Then you take dinner duty today."

He sat up a little and patted her head a few times with a look of exasperation.

"But make it something exciting. Things have been gloomy around here lately, so make some fried chicken or something and we can all eat it together."

"Oh, okay. I know a good spice recipe, so that's fine."

She began to stand up, but then she felt a gaze on her from the

side.

She looked over and saw Hiba. His head was poking out of his futon and he was rubbing his eyes sleepily.

“Oh, good morning, Harakawa-san and-…”

He trailed off and his expression froze.

Eh? thought Heo as the boy looked directly at her and Harakawa.

She was lying naked on top of Harakawa and they even had the blanket placed across them.

…Um…

Just as she prepared to explain the situation, Hiba jumped to his feet.

“H-has the Eros Road to the Eros World finally opened in the real world!?”

“Calm down, Hiba Ryuuji.”

“Wh-where’s the entrance!? I want to… I want to dive into that other world! L-like this!!”

“I said to calm down, Hiba Ryuuji. There is no entrance to anywhere like that.”

However, Hiba twisted around and pointed both his index fingers toward them.

“Th-then what do you think you’re doing there!? Damn, I’m so jealous!”

“You’re supposed to keep one of those opinions a secret, Hiba Ryuuji. Just to be clear, this is a misunderstanding.”

“B-but Harakawa-san! I’ve caught you red-handed, you immoral person!”

“H-he is not immoral!!” shouted Heo. “H-he is a very straightforward person! I’m sure he needs more than a kid like me! He would probably only be satisfied with an adult who can only be described with the word ‘boing’. That’s right! Boing! Boiiing!!”

“I get the feeling you’re rejecting a part of my personality here, Heo Thunderson. And don’t use so many sound effects.”

“But!”

Heo rose up to protest, but that caused the blanket to fall off of her.

“————!”

Just as she swallowed a scream and frantically pulled the blanket toward her, she heard a sudden sound.

Something was banging on the storm shutter from the outside.

She could only think of one reason to cause so much noise at a time like this.

“A pervert?”

“I-it isn’t me, probably! I-it really probably isn’t me, right!?”

After Hiba’s desperate denial, Heo heard another sound.

This one was of destruction.

But it was different from the sounds in her dream. It was the sound of wood splitting and breaking.

…Eh?

Her question was followed by a wind that chilled her even through the blanket.

“What is going on?”

She poked her head from the blanket and looked.

The wind was coming from where the storm shutter had been, but it was now entirely open and the early morning light and wind came in.

The twilight outlined the faint silhouette of a man.

He was a skinny old man with long black hair.

“My name is Yonkichi,” he said in inappropriately old-fashioned speech. “I take it you are awake.”

Heo heard those words and felt Harakawa’s arm wrap around her waist.

…This is…

She knew what was happening. There was only reason he would pull her close and try to protect her.

And Yonkichi gave that reason with a bitter smile of resignation.

“It is time to fight, ladies and gentlemen.”

The word “fight” reminded her of the dream and she gasped.

However…

“Why do we have to fight?”

“Because it is fun. For us, anyway.”

“B-but what about for us!?” she replied from below the blanket.

“Well,” said Yonkichi with a nod. “Your first reward is the Concept Core, but it would seem Sayama-sama has yet to inform you of the second reward. As one of the four brothers, I will explain it once more. When you defeat us, we will tell you a little of what we know of the past.”

Heo heard what she most wanted at the moment.

“We fought in that battle in Osaka, so if you defeat us, we will leave you with a small piece of that memory. Yes, the memory of the past that created the current UCAT and your current situation!”

Heo sucked in a breath.

…What do we do!?

She knew they had an enemy and she knew they would gain something by defeating that enemy.

…But…

However, Yonkichi took action with no concern for her thoughts.

He raised his right arm without losing the bitter smile.

“Now, get up!”

Before his short sentence had even ended, a corner of the house exploded.

Chapter 11

“Flow of Human Will”

Where does regret come from?
From within?
From without?

●

A room was lined with small tables and chairs.

Windows covered the room's southern wall and the almost gray light of morning was partially blocked by the giant logo-covered stickers on those windows. The stickers contained a simplified drawing of a mountain bandit leader.

"The Japanese fast food chain Most Valiant Burger. IAI sure runs some strange places. I'm also not sure I approve of calling a rice sandwich a 'riceger'."

Those complaints came from a woman in a white coat sitting alone by the window.

The tray on the two-person table held two rice balls wrapped in paper (a new product), a cup of consommé, and lightly pickled asparagus and lettuce.

The woman looked a little like an Asian girl and she rested her head on her hand and stared out the window despite the food in front of her.

She could see the city in early morning. The roundabout in front of the train station contained nothing but a single car and some parked buses. Very few people were in evidence and no motion could be seen.

"I wonder if they're having an exciting time of it."

Just as she released the contents of her lungs, she heard a female voice.

"May I sit with you, Doctor Chao?"

Chao looked up at the woman who sat down across from her.

"Diana? How did you know I was here?"

Diana wore a black suit and a large black scarf and she nodded while setting down her tray.

She brushed back her long hair and settled down in the chair.

"You underwent a similar process to me, so I released some paper birds and asked them if they spotted anyone like me around Okutama."

Diana rested her right elbow on the table and showed off the raised palm.

She held a five centimeter crane created from folded black paper.

She closed her hand and the crane vanished before she opened it

again.

"I see." Chao crossed her arms. "The philosopher's stone reading is weak, so I thought I'd be fine as long as an automaton didn't find me, but I forgot about you. …So what are you going to do, descendent of Zonburg? Report me to UCAT?"

"Oh, dear. Is that what you think of me? I am nowhere near that boring a woman."

Diana hummed as she lifted up a wrapped rice ball. She held the overflowing contents in with the bottom of the wrapper and bit in.

"The tuna scrape riceger special is so good. I've recently taken a liking to using wasabi as a topping."

"The seaweed and Chinese pickles are enough for me."

"It has plenty of fiber, doesn't it? But it's a shame the coffee here is cofftea."

Diana wiped her lips with a paper napkin and drank some corn soup from her cup.

After a sip, she spoke.

"I hear those four old men are on the move."

"Are you going to stop them?"

"No, I will leave that to anyone with too much time on their hands and their appropriate opponents. I have other plans."

"Plans?"

"Yes. After I finish my work at UCAT tonight, I am meeting an acquaintance in the city. I also need to find some books for Heo there. I need to give her some books on Japanese culture, bizarre Japanese festivals, and anti-pervert self-defense."

"I see." Chao nodded and grabbed her riceger while looking out the window. "But you know what's happening and why, don't you?"

"Testament," replied Diana. Still smiling, she turned toward Chao. "Those four old men were created as the temporary bodies for 7th-Gear's Concept Core and they will return to their Concept Core form once they accept an inheritor. And if they do not…"

"They will vanish along with the Concept Core when their lifespan runs out. When I created them in 7th-Gear, the 7th-Gear sages planning to become the Concept Core instructed me to make them that way. They were not gods. They had simply reached the ultimate form of mankind, so they would only be bored with a world they could not accept. That is why I made them age as they lost interest

in this world."

A bitter laugh filled the restaurant.

"Those four have lost interest right on time. This world may have changed quite a bit after the war, but it still failed to interest them. I think it was during your generation that their aging slowed," explained Chao. "But their aging accelerated during the last ten years. And around when we received 5th-Gear's Concept Core, they came to tell me something."

"That they're so bored they want to go try some things out for themselves?"

Diana's gaze dropped, she took a bite of her riceger, and she brought a hand to her mouth.

"Ah, that bite had a lot of wasabi."

"How about you decide whether you're having a serious conversation or eating?" asked Chao as she took a bite of her own rice. "Besides, I've been feeling a little emotional lately. Hanging around me will only put you in a bad mood. …I know it's not like me, but I've been thinking. Why did I even create those four?"

She watched a bus leave the roundabout outside the window and she listened to its engine and the other background noises.

"At the time, I was invited to 7th-Gear, shown the ultimate in bodily modification techniques, and even heard they could create artificial humans using the Concept Core as a basis. I was simply delighted and the 7th-Gear people were happy to see my delight. But," she said. "Did I make them only so they could die?"

"…"

"Diana, do you ever plan to have kids?"

Diana shrugged at the sudden question.

"I like fried chicken, so I think the stork hates me."

"I like grilled chicken, so I think I'm the same. But I do wonder. What are parents thinking when they have kids? Do any parents have kids just so they can die?"

She gave a quiet laugh and ate her rice while still looking out the window.

She took a large bite to create a pause and then swallowed.

"I knew what was going to happen to them when I made them. And I was happy to do it. But back then, I never imagined how I would feel about it now."

"What would you have done if you had known that then?"

"Well…"

Chao stopped moving, closed her eyes, and gave a self-deprecating look.

"You're cruel, Diana. Wishing for something I couldn't have done only brings frustration."

Chao turned around to face Diana and crossed her legs.

"Those four are strong. Will Heo and the others be okay? Kazami and Izumo didn't put up much of a fight."

"If Heo and the others die, that's just the way it is. But even then, it doesn't mean those four were born to die. …They were born to do something, but they simply chose to die on the way there. That is how I view it."

"And where did that idea come from?"

"Ten years ago, a group of people chose to die together just as they had eaten, lived, and spoken together. I chose not to and they disappeared from my life. But even though they passed away, they are still crying and laughing, talking and falling silent, and walking and stopping. I try to think that I have no reason for sorrow since this merely means I can no longer meet them."

Diana held the cup of corn soup in both hands and quietly looked out the window.

"If we can create a continuation to the act of dying, I believe my friends will return. But those four old men are trying to create an ending. And that ending will act as the final destination of 7th-Gear's Concept War."

"Yes. They are trying to fight and enjoy themselves as the people of 7th-Gear. This is likely their first and last chance to build up their experience, reveal their identities, and enjoy themselves with the greatest power possible. They most likely want to have fun and win…but even if they win, it is over for them," said Chao. "They are probably thinking that they were born to die. And if the purpose of their existence lies in their deaths, why were they not allowed to die immediately after their births? …They probably resent me for knowing that when I created them."

"That is something only they can know. …But that is exactly why I hope they can enjoy themselves until the end arrives. I hope Heo, the Sayama boy, and the others can satisfy them."

Diana took a sip from the cup and smiled.

She directly faced Chao with that smile.

“But it is my students who will be victorious. Not those four old men.”

She took a breath.

“The Sayama boy once said he would never admit defeat no matter how many times he lost and that he would win in the end. … Crazy, isn’t it?”

She smiled bitterly, but Chao did not nod.

But she did speak and reach for another wrapped riceger.

“I see you don’t cry anymore, Diana. When you first came to Japan, you would always get mad for others and cry.”

“Testament,” quietly agreed Diana.

She opened a new wrapper and brought the rice to her mouth.

“…”

She tried to eat the entire riceger at once and Chao glared at her.

“Your snake-like eating hasn’t changed, though.”

“D-don’t compare me to a snake. I am the Mother Cat.”

“Oh?” Chao pulled a cigarette from her pocket. “I’m finally feeling a little better. Mind if I smoke?’

“No, go ahead.”

Diana pulled lipstick from her pocket, wrote two words on a napkin, and placed it in front of her.

“ ‘Get lost’? What’s this? Are you picking a fight with me?”

“It is for the smoke, Doctor Chao. …Anyway, talking about those four really is reminding me of the past. For example, there were others who desired victory to bring something to an end ten years ago and before.”

“That there were. …And there are people who want that now too.” Chao lit the cigarette in her mouth. “The Army. We know very well what they’re thinking, don’t we? They’re a collection of the remnants and crimes of the Concept War. They wish to destroy the victorious survivor that is UCAT but also to eliminate themselves. That way they can create a peaceful world with no victor.”

“Only a group small enough to vanish could come up with an idea like that. They’re willing to use any dirty method of winning. All that matters is eliminating their enemy and themselves,” said Diana. “So they will simply do evil without even being a villain. The more evil

they are, the more the later world will know of the evil committed during the Concept War, so that later world will avoid conflict once they vanish. …They think the people of that later world will be able to appreciate peace.”

“Be careful, Diana. My four may be attacking now, but the Army is definitely coming. And meanwhile, Team Leviathan has disbanded and both Kazami and Izumo are out of the fight.”

“I know that.” Diana nodded and raised her eyebrows a little. “But those four are the more pressing problem for now. …I will keep it a secret, so can you tell me what they’re going to do?”

Chao exhaled some smoke and it reversed direction toward her and the wall once it arrived above the napkin in front of Diana.

“Ah, that pisses me off. I’m not telling you now.”

“O-oh, come on. I just want to know a little. Oh, I know. How about some dessert? The youke, a fusion of youkan and cake, is something like kintsuba.”

“How are you supposed to pronounce that?”

“Youke.”

“…Well, whatever. Ikkou is maintaining his weapons and Nijun is pursuing Sayama. Mitsuaki works more behind the scenes, so he should be with Ikkou. And Yonkichi… He’s pursuing Heo and the others.”

Diana’s expression stiffened at that last fact.

“Yonkichi is?”

“That’s right. Surely you know that he’s the strongest of the four brothers when looking at a one-on-one battle. …Now, how will this turn out?”

Chao blew smoke upwards and it gathered like a cloud up near the ceiling.

“Those children are always playing the fools, but they’ve finally realized what they need to do and will give this their all. They helped you all ten years ago, but their strength and determination are entirely different now. They will be asking the question that was always kept hidden inside them.”

Chao looked to Diana with the smile of those four’s parent.

“They will win. They are the ones asking, so their strength as they ask will be greater than all else. Can’t you hear them asking, Diana? The question should resound on and on forever. They lost the world

they were born in and they were born to accept this world and die.”

She took a breath.

“So they will ask why they are alive. And they are completely serious. …That nonsense doesn’t suit them at all, does it?”

●

Yonkichi fought in the outdoor dojo next to the Hiba family house.

He wore a filthy white work outfit below a white flight jacket.

That was his usual outfit.

The sky was changing from white to blue and the Okutama air was becoming the clear air of morning.

That was the usual state of the world. Low-Gear was no different from normal.

It was a weekday, so the people would be waking up, eating breakfast, and living their lives by going to school, going to work, or completing housework.

But, thought Yonkichi.

…I am different from normal.

Normally, he was not dodging fists in the morning.

Normally, he was not dodging kicks in the morning.

Normally, he was not breaking free of throws in the morning.

Normally…

…I am not fighting Hiba’s grandson in the morning.

This was not normal. He was certain he was currently doing things differently from others. He was the only one in the world who…no, he and his opponent, Hiba, were the only ones feeling this.

It was a wonderful thing.

…We were born to test this Gear and to die. Fulfilling that is the will of 7th-Gear, which you can call our father, and it is for the sake of Chao Sei, the mother who responded to that will.

But his brothers had said something else.

…We do not know if that is correct.

Their lifespans were reaching their end. They were losing interest in this world that lacked change, so they wanted to hurry up and die. If they died, they could fulfill the meaning of their birth.

But, thought Yonkichi as he deflected Hiba’s fist with an arm and slammed his elbow into the boy.

…My heart wishes for entertainment before then.

He remembered what his brothers had said.

…We can think about that while performing the test.

And if they did not completely lose interest before the end came, they could say Low-Gear had more value than simply bringing their end.

They would draw out all of their ability, use it without hesitation, watch their surprised opponent, smile whether they had won or lost, and reach their own highest point.

…Then we will accept Low-Gear.

But, he thought again.

Hiba ducked to avoid a kick and tried to sweep away Yonkichi's supporting leg with a horizontal kick, so Yonkichi jumped straight up to evade.

"But…"

Down below, the rotation of the horizontal kick prevented Hiba from moving.

Yonkichi dropped his heel down on the boy.

He was confident it would hit.

His reason was simple: Hiba's actions were far too easy to predict.

The boy was used to god of war combat, so his actions appeared compact but actually used wide motions.

He quickly rotated those large motions to prevent his opponent from seeing through them.

He was like a miniature typhoon.

If you knew where his center was, he was nothing more than swinging arms and legs. Hitting his weak points was easy.

And Yonkichi did exactly that.

His dropping heel travelled straight toward the top of the head.

Hiba's balance was fixed due to the rotation of the horizontal kick, so an attack from directly above would slam him into the ground and prevent the damage from slipping away.

This attack would knock him unconscious. The pain in his head would keep him from even drinking anything properly for the rest of the day.

His heel hit.

"!"

With the sound of bone being struck, Hiba was knocked into the

ground while rotating.

Yonkichi used the recoil to flip backwards and land on the hard ground.

“But this is boring, as it does not allow me to reach my highest point.”

He saw Hiba doubled over on the ground and not moving, so he corrected his posture and turned his back on the boy.

He faced the house.

Someone stood in front of the broken entrance to one room.

It was a short old man wearing a dark samue.

Yonkichi bowed toward him.

“Will you be opposing me as well, Ryuutetsu-sama. To refresh my mind, I will add a new speech quirk, puru.”

“I’d rather not fight someone who speaks like that.”

“It is best to ignore it, puru. But more importantly…”

Yonkichi let his arms dangle next to him and turned his body toward the other man.

“Will you be fighting me or not, puru?”

“No, that’s no longer my role. I’m about to go check on the field with Toshi.”

Ryuutetsu pointed to his left.

Yonkichi turned to look and found where he had previously knocked Hiba Ryuuji to the ground.

He also saw the boy slowly standing and shaking his head.

…But that was a solid blow.

Hiba brushed a hand through his hair and finished standing. He made a gentle hop to plant his feet on the ground and began stepping forward and back. He started slow but quickly gained speed.

His eyes were trained directly on Yonkichi.

“During the summer, I was taught something by an upperclassman even more perverted than me and another upperclassman who I can never hope to match when it comes to acts of perversion. I was taught that I don’t prepare my defenses and that I think I’ve won too soon.”

He spat onto the ground next to him and the spit was colored red.

“When you jumped up, I remembered when I lost to them. …I lost twice, but I won’t lose a third time. I’m taking this seriously.”

“I see, I see.”

Yonkichi nodded toward Ryuutetsu and faced Hiba again.

Instead of letting his arms dangle, he held them forward at slightly above shoulder height.

His elbows swayed, he pulled on the sleeves, and he lightly spread his arms with the wrists and hands sticking out.

“Then I too shall take this a little seriously, puru.”

“A little seriously?”

He clenched his fists while nodding to Hiba’s question.

A moment later, the air exploded, a large portion of the hard dojo ground burst, and Hiba was blown away.

The battle had begun anew.

Chapter 12

“For a Conclusion”

I was told to be hurt
I was told to be destroyed
What is the answer?

●

Hiba rode the destruction of the land.

He had assumed Yonkichi's actions would lead to some kind of attack, so he had used all his strength to avoid it.

It could have been an impact, a slash, or a projectile.

Thanks to his two losses during the summer, he took an evasive stance before even seeing the enemy's attack.

That decision proved wise.

The entire space within three meters around him was destroyed.

It was almost an explosion.

As the bursting air knocked him away, he spun around and took a landing pose.

…What was that!?

He could tell it was some sort of spatial strike. In the instant the space was compressed and made to burst, that space was acclimated to the surrounding space. That caused anything in the bursting space to burst along with it.

He understood the idea behind it.

…But how does he do it? What does he use?

He landed with those questions in mind, held a hand up to block the whirling wind and scattering fragments of the ground, and looked forward.

The second attack was coming.

"…!"

He forcefully leaped backwards again to leave the three meter range of destruction, but…

"This one's bigger!?"

That instinctual decision led him to increase the force of his leap. He flew a full five meters back.

A moment later, the bursting space closed right in front of him. The range had been five meters instead of three.

…Does this mean he still isn't going all out!?

Everything split and burst before him.

The wind and torn ground caused him to frantically pull back.

He watched the air explode and corrected his fighting stance.

…But what do I do?

He clenched his right fist, but he doubted it could do much against

this destructive power. And their previous battle told him the old man had a slight edge when it came to a pure exchange of attacks.

His enemy had the advantage in power, skill, and speed.

"Calm down."

If I think about it, there has to be a way, he told himself.

And so he cleared his mind of all idle thoughts.

…I will empty my mind!

A sudden image of Mikage in the nude appeared in his mind.

…And I will stay positive!

He decided this image was a message from the god of beauty that he needed to stay positive. As long as he had no other idle thoughts, nothing else mattered.

But…

…Mikage-san hasn't been letting me in the bath with her recently.

It had started two weeks before. She had said she wanted to practice bathing alone and had not let him in. His mother must have supported Mikage's independence because she had tried to stab him with a spear through the peephole he had tried to use.

That meant his only images of Mikage in the nude were images of the past.

…But that's fine too. Imagination!!

At that point, he suddenly realized he needed to focus on the battle, so he gently crossed his arms in front of his face to clear his mind.

"Stop throbbing, my heart. Stop throbbing, my heart!"

"Are you really taking this seriously, puru?"

"I don't want to hear that from you, Mr. Puru!! Are you listening? Please listen, ma,am!"

With that shout, Hiba suddenly took action.

There were a few ways to overcome a difference in power, skill, and speed.

One of those was to take the initiative.

He would find an opportunity and take advantage of it. It was also called taking the enemy by surprise.

His opponent's attacks affected a range, but that range started at three meters.

If he made his way within three meters of the enemy, that enemy

could not use that power for fear of hitting himself.

Hiba took a low leap and jumped again without slowing down.

He was not running; he was making consecutive leaps. He approached Yonkichi without letting his initial speed drop.

Once he arrived within five meters of the man, Yonkichi reacted by raising his left arm and clenching his fist.

"…!"

He swung it down.

The three meter area around Hiba, a six meters sphere of space, burst.

It bent, compressed, and eventually exploded.

The sound rang clearly, but Hiba was alive.

He had not been torn apart or broken and he continued to fight.

He had approached his enemy.

He was in the air.

He was falling from approximately five meters over Yonkichi's head.

"————————"

The principle behind this great leap was simple.

His enemy's attack took a spherical form, so if he jumped up and spread himself out over the curve of the sphere, the force of the explosion would throw him upwards.

The enemy had set the center of the sphere close to the ground in order to hit him, so half of it had been buried.

He jumped over it.

The speed he had built up while approaching maintained his forward momentum even as he rode the blast radiating from the sphere.

This was what it meant to predict what would happen next.

And he continued fighting.

In the air, he twisted his body and made a dropping savate kick.

He did not simply drop his heel. Doing that would send his center of gravity into the ground if he landed. It was all over if the enemy evaded.

But with a savate kick, he could twist his body around and keep moving when he landed. The impact of landing could be transformed into a rotation. The attack was harder to read since it did not move in a straight line and people's plummeting opinion of him would rise

if he won here.

Hiba used this attack as a way of killing four birds with one stone.

However, he saw something in front of him.

Yonkichi had moved his left arm. However, the man did not raise his hand.

…He pulled back his hips and formed a fist!?

If he created a spatial explosion here, he would be caught in the blast too.

Nevertheless, he moved.

A sound similar to an impact but with some flexibility added in came from behind Yonkichi.

The ground sank down behind him but not because something had gouged into it. Something had appeared there and crushed it.

Hiba knew a similar phenomenon occurred when Mikage summoned Susamikado, so he knew what was appearing.

“A god of war!?

●

Hiba saw bluish-white light behind Yonkichi that resembled an electrical discharge.

At the same time, the objects producing the spatial explosions appeared behind his arms.

They were giant arms.

The two red and yellow arms were at least three meters long and they resembled both armor and muscle. They rose alongside his arms while copying his movements.

“I will take this a little more seriously, puru. This is the reproductive offensive shell known as the Great Sage, puru. It is a collection of the greatest byproducts of 7th-Gear’s bodily modification techniques and this is my first time to use them outside of fights with my brothers, puru.”

Instead of simple spatial compression, he sent out a straight-line three-meter uppercut.

The attack was much like the movement of a pile driver.

“!”

Meanwhile, Hiba temporarily lost all understanding.

He had trouble with unexpected actions. He had lost before due to that weakness and it was happening again.

…I can't let that happen!!

He woke his mind as if clinging to a thought.

More on reflex than conscious thought, he used the crisis response abilities and physical abilities built up inside him.

He twisted his upper body, swung his arms, and raised the speed of his savate kick.

He swung his right leg as if pouring it down on the fist that shot toward him like it had teleported.

…My heel.

It hit the middle finger of the giant fist. His heel struck the base of the finger and he placed the sole of his foot on it.

"…!"

He absorbed the force, bent his ankle, bent his knee, lowered his hips, crouched down, spread his arms for balance, and even lowered his head.

He took all those actions in an instant to absorb the coming impact with his entire body.

He stored the force of the rising Great Sage fist's movement in his body.

That fist reached the end of its movement and stopped.

With nowhere else to go, the force inside Hiba's body threatened to explode, but a moment before, he jumped diagonally backwards into the sky.

He stopped the force building inside him by leaping accurately in the direction of the giant fist's path.

He more flew than jumped.

He had a high initial speed and Gs pressed down on him to send him down into the darkness.

…But it's better than taking all this as damage!

After jumping around a dozen meters, his speed suddenly vanished. His blood flow quickly rose to his head and his mind cleared.

He had reached a face-up position in midair, so the sky lay before his eyes. That sky was shifting from early morning to morning and it contained some faint clouds.

"…"

He bent backwards so his head pointed down, so he saw the upside-down mountains and then what lay below.

About five meters down were the open-air dojo and the house.

“Mikage-san.”

“Right.”

The tall girl that replied awkwardly ran into the open-air dojo in a yukata.

Hiba rotated his body to land in front of her, spread his arms as he stood, and spoke with her.

“Susamikado!!”

It came.

The wind spiraled behind them and a black giant almost ten meters tall appeared behind Mikage.

It was Susamikado.

The black god of war’s frame, power source, sensory devices, etc. linked together and armor appeared over them all.

The bolts to hold its black body together audibly fit in place, Mikage was lifted by gravitational control, and she was taken inside Susamikado.

“Too slow, puru.”

Hiba realized Yonkichi’s voice came from behind.

…!?

The appearance of and combination with Susamikado happened in a mere instant. He should have been able to board 3rd-Gear’s greatest weapon without leaving an opening, but Hiba realized something in that split-second.

…Our enemy is 7th-Gear!

3rd-Gear could not fight without the power of a god of war, but this higher Gear had managed that.

Yonkichi interfered using pure speed.

Hiba turned around and saw the man riding the Great Sage’s extended hand.

The Great Sage’s shoulders were linked with a backpack-like curved component and shimmering heat rose from behind it.

Yonkichi extended his right hand forward from atop the giant palm.

His hand held Mikage and his grasp prevented her from entering Susamikado.

Her eyes opened wide and she turned toward the man.

“Now, then.”

Still riding the Great Sage's right palm, Yonkichi casually raised his left hand.

That was when something strange happened.

The Great Sage's left hand grew. It inflated like a balloon and yet appeared to remain just as solid. The giant arm grew to about ten meters long.

"Ever-changing and absurdly powerful. That is the ultimate form of 7th-Gear," he said. "Oh, I forgot to say 'puru'."

The Great Sage's even greater left arm punched Susamikado.

With the sound of breaking glass, the god of war doubled over and floated up in the air. Mikage had yet to combine with it, but she was swung up into the air due to being under its gravitational control.

Red warning lights appeared across Susamikado's body to inform them of errors. It then vanished so it would not be influenced by anyone but its master.

That left Mikage alone in the air.

She had not actually been struck by the blow, but she had been thrown by its momentum and she flew toward a closed rain shutter on the house.

"Mikage-san!"

Hiba hurried, but he would not make it in time.

Even so, something helped him: an attack from Yonkichi.

The old man jumped down from the Great Sage's hand and slammed his right fist into Hiba's side.

Hiba's breath was forced out from his mouth and nose and he heard a sound from his side.

The counterattack sent him flying through the air toward Mikage.

In exchange, three of his ribs were broken.

The pain had not yet reached him, but it would once he took in a breath and his blood circulated. But first…

"Kah."

Something that was not quite a breath burst from his mouth.

He then stopped breathing. Once he caught up to Mikage in the air and held her in his arms, he found she had passed out.

He embraced her.

…The house.

They slammed into it, but the impact was surprisingly soft.

"!?"

He was stopped by something that felt more absorbing than flexible and his back slid down to what felt like the ground.

An instant later, the sky above grew dark.

He was seeing the ceiling. He saw the old ceiling panels of the house.

He had slid after landing and only stopped once he hit a cabinet inside.

“Ow.”

The pain arrived. Simply inhaling felt like fingers digging into his left side.

He frowned as the pain filled the core of his being like the inside of his muscles were being directly twisted. Only then did he realize that someone had opened the rain shutter and laid out a futon for them to land on.

“Harakawa-san!?”

●

Harakawa walked past Hiba who lay motionless with Mikage in his arms.

He was leaving the house with something like a large log over his shoulder.

He clicked his tongue toward Hiba.

“Sorry, Hiba, but it took some time getting Heo ready.”

“S-sorry.”

Heo was wrapped in the Swiss roll of a blanket over Harakawa’s shoulder and she lowered the head sticking out the back. As the contents of the Swiss roll, she turned toward Harakawa who was moving outside.

“Wh-what are we going to do, Harakawa?”

“It’s a pain, but we need to drive that guy away. Can’t you see what’s happening here?”

“B-but if we attack with Thunder Fellow, that puru guy will be…”

“He isn’t holding back either, Heo Thunderson.”

“B-but!”

“He knows the past of our parents that you want so much. Is that not enough motivation? If not, then what do you really want?”

Harakawa felt the Swiss roll’s contents shake and hold its breath.

“Listen, Heo Thunderson. This is our duty.”

"I'm sorry." The Swiss roll's head turned weakly toward him. "B-but how are we going to fight?"

"That's the question," he said as he stepped outside.

Hiba was collapsed, a portion of the house was destroyed, and Ryuutetsu was out at the field with his wife.

…This is like something from a shounen manga.

Yonkichi was approximately eight meters away. The Great Sage was back to its original size, but its backpack had not vanished. It had moved quickly enough to interfere with Susamikado's appearance, so Harakawa doubted they had time to board Thunder Fellow.

But…

"Heo, does Thunder Fellow understand our situation?"

"Eh? Yes, it seems he can see the outside world a little."

The Swiss roll tried to turn toward him, but it threw them off balance. *This isn't as easy as the delivery job at Yokota that I've been keeping alongside my UCAT work,* thought Harakawa as he left the side of the building.

"U-um, Harakawa. You've been grabbing my butt through the blanket for a while now."

"Enough false accusations. I can't tell where I'm touching through the blanket and I haven't been infected by Team Leviathan enough to want to do that right now."

"What is the deal with Team Leviathan anyway?" sighed Heo.

Harakawa suddenly thought about that question from a different perspective.

…What is it really?

Sayama had temporarily disbanded it, but did it make any difference when they were still fighting like this?

And if not, why had Kazami protested so much when Sayama had made them disband?

"…?"

However, he could not quite grasp what exactly he was asking.

After all…

…Why are they so concerned with what is nothing more than a name?

He felt as if that was where he would find the reason Sayama had them disband.

“The past, hm?”

…What about the past gives such meaning to the name Team Leviathan?

However, he decided this was not the time to think about it.

He stopped thinking, stood in the yard, and faced Yonkichi who was in the center of the open-air dojo to the west.

“Listen. Unlike Susamikado, Thunder Fellow is intelligent. If you try to interfere while we’re boarding him, he can decide on his own to crush you. So…”

“So you’re telling me to leave, puru?”

“No. I’m telling you to get lost.”

Harakawa spoke to the contents of the Swiss roll supported by his shoulder.

“Heo, I warned him, so summon Thunder Fellow.”

“Eh? B-but how am I supposed to do that? He has trouble appearing when he doesn’t sense me in danger.”

Harakawa wordlessly stripped away the Swiss roll.

Having lost its support, the blanket fell across his right shoulder like a cloak and the contents exposed her flesh-colored body with her stomach resting on his shoulder.

“Ee,” she shrieked. “N-noooooo!! Thunder Fellowwwww!!!”

●

Yonkichi did not interfere with Thunder Fellow’s appearance.

Harakawa had already explained why. The mechanical dragon had a personality so interfering would be the same as placing himself in front of his enemy.

Wind wrapped around Thunder Fellow as he appeared in the parking area made from a dirt clearing in front of the house.

He was only eight meters away and he filled their vision like a mountain or a wall.

It only took an instant for the blue and white dragon to open the cockpit and let the two humans inside.

“…!!”

After a moment, he let loose a mechanical roar.

He was over thirty meters long, how much he weighed was anyone’s guess, he had appeared already in his close-quarters combat form, and shimmering heat rose from the accelerators on

the back of his body.

If he charged forward, there would be no escaping his speed and size and there would be no defending against or enduring his weight and solidness.

However, Yonkichi stood still without running.

He saw Thunder Fellow hold his head and reluctantly speak.

“H-Harakawa! That was just mean!! I don’t want anyone but you to see me like that!”

“Relax, Heo Thunderson. The microbes in the bath are always watching.”

“How could you say that?”

The voices stopped.

Yonkichi saw Harakawa moving inside the cockpit. He grabbed the roll bars sticking out on either side and leaned his entire body forward.

…Not bad.

That Harakawa boy was one of the last to join Team Leviathan, but he knows how to commit to a fight, thought Yonkichi.

…But can he keep that balance with Miss Heo with him?

He did not have time to add the “puru” to his thoughts.

He then saw something happen in what could only be called an “instant”.

Thunder Fellow’s limbs pulled up and the mechanical dragon fired a wave of shimmering heat behind him.

“!”

He charged forward.

In only eight meters, steam exploded in front of his nose.

Wind expanded in a ring and the house’s roof tiles floated up a little before being blown away.

However, Yonkichi calmly watched the high-speed charge and realized what Harakawa was after.

His senses were synchronized with Thunder Fellow’s so he could make minor adjustments to his course even at this speed.

And Thunder Fellow was flying just a bit left of Yonkichi’s center line.

If the man did not evade, he would be killed instantly. Even if he did, he would be badly injured. And if he used some special method to completely avoid it, it could lead to an escape.

Yonkichi knew what Harakawa had to be thinking.

…He expects me to use a special method of dodging.

Even if he expanded the Great Sage to more than ten meters, he could not hope to match the mechanical dragon named Thunder Fellow. To prove that, Harakawa had opted for a direct charge instead of a cannon blast.

…An excellent decision.

But, thought Yonkichi.

As his reflexes saw through the speed, he paused briefly and then spoke.

“Fixed concept…activate.”

A moment later, words filled the air.

- **—The world is reversed for an instant.**

The result showed itself immediately afterwards.

Thunder Fellow’s thirty meter form struck something and was blown away.

With a rumbling sound, armor fragments flew and Thunder Fellow pitched forward.

“…!?”

Harakawa and Heo gave confused voices as they crashed into the forest beyond the open-air dojo.

Their momentum broke through and knocked over the trees, armor fragments scattered from the parts that were bent, and the mass of destruction that was Thunder Fellow smashed the forest.

The forest covered a rising mountain slope, so the toppling mass of metal tore into the dirt for about five seconds before stopping.

After that, the mountain crumbled away for about one hundred twenty meters.

Yonkichi saw birds fly from the forest.

“Now, then,” he muttered. “Does this make you angry, puru?”

He turned to his right.

Someone stood behind him there.

“Brunhild-sama.”

The girl wearing a school uniform stood less than a meter away with a small bird on her head.

●

Brunhild did not understand.

Thunder Fellow had suddenly been knocked away during his charge, so she could assume something had attacked him. What she did not understand was why Yonkichi was no longer in the open-air dojo.

“Why are you here?”

She frowned toward the white flight jacket which she had found right in front of her after leaving the house.

She was in front of the house where Harakawa had opened the rain shutter to the room the girls had been staying in.

“Isn’t this near where Thunder Fellow was?”

What had happened? As she tried to find the answer, the black cat walked up and spoke to her.

“The world was reversed, Brunhild. So…”

“You’re a sharp one. …Yes, I reversed Thunder Fellow’s position with my own.”

The old man smiled at them over his shoulder.

“I reversed them at the moment of impact, so Thunder Fellow collided with himself.”

“Then I just have to do this.”

Brunhild threw a piece of paper too quickly to see the movement of her hand.

She threw it toward her own neck and it had a certain image written on it.

“If I add the final dot for the word ‘sever’, it will slice off your head instead. Isn’t that right?”

“Care to try?”

“Are you provoking me?”

“I am stopping you. That is why I asked that. …Care to try?”

Brunhild’s frown grew. She pulled a pen from her pocket and brought the tip to the paper on her neck.

Just as she began to pull it across the paper, the bird flew from her head and a voice reached her.

“Don’t, Brunhild!!”

The black cat jumped up from the ground to keep her hand from moving.

…Eh?

Her finger moved the pen and activated the paper.

A moment later, the paper’s severing power activated.

However, it affected her and not Yonkichi.

“!?”

…Why!? I thought a reversing concept was in effect!?

The unexpected outcome left her unable to move, but the severing power was obstructed by something else.

That something was the black cat.

She had instinctually twisted away from him as he jumped toward her, so she had avoided the severing power. Instead, the black cat’s back jerked in midair.

Before she could say anything, the cat fell into her arms.

She held him there, but he was completely limp.

He was so soft she was not sure where to hold him, a pink line ran across his back, and something red appeared on his fur there.

“Wait…”

The question “Why?” entered her mind.

Wasn’t this a reversed world? And why had this happened to the

cat?

The cat lifted his head a little in her arms.

“Good…bye.”

“From that, I take it you’re fine.”

She did not hesitate to jab a finger into his stomach and he bent backwards.

“Ow ow ow ow! Now my stomach *and* my back hurt!! And Brunhild! Aren’t you going to thank me!?”

“You lost your chance when you worried me with that cheesy act.”

“Oh? So you were worried?”

“Just go to sleep.”

She stuck a hemostatic paper and sleep-inducing paper on him and faced Yonkichi again.

“I get it now. The world is reversed for an instant. In other words, you get to choose when that instant is. If you don’t create an instant of reversal, the attack continues as is, but if you do, the attacker attacks himself.”

“So how about it? Will you fight me, 1st-Gear Inspector?”

“Was fighting those four not enough?”

Brunhild looked over toward them. Inside the house, Hiba was unconscious yet still protectively holding Mikage. In the forest, Harakawa was lying face down inside Thunder Fellow’s cockpit.

Yonkichi glanced toward them as well.

“Do you really think that was enough?”

“Then look at your left arm.”

Yonkichi did so and they both saw that something was missing.

“…My arm.”

It had vanished all the way up to the base.

His eyes opened wide when he noticed, but Brunhild only casually held the cat.

The bird flew back to her head as she spoke.

“You didn’t notice that Hiba and Mikage got a small attack in on you when you knocked them away? The damage was so small you probably didn’t even feel it, but it caused you to miss the timing of your ‘instant’ just a little bit. …Quite a heavy price to pay for underestimating them.”

“Ha…”

Yonkichi took in a breath and looked at his left shoulder. Flesh and bone could be seen there, but it was not bleeding.

His structure as a living weapon had likely sealed off the blood vessels automatically.

Brunhild then heard his voice.

“Ha ha!!”

His breaths repeated the syllable “ha” again and again.

While laughing, he brought his right hand to his forehead, bent back, and held his stomach with the Great Sage’s hands.

“Now this is entertaining! It’s not much, but it is certainly entertaining! It is enjoyable! This is so wonderfully enjoyable, brothers!!”

Brunhild heard his laughter and words travel into the sky.

“When four of them work together, the people supporting Low-Gear can entertain one of us at least a little bit!”

With that, he twisted his body.

“I never expected to lose my left arm! I am both surprised and astonished! I am a little confused at the moment, but you know what? This is oddly entertaining. …Thirty points!”

“Then I assume taking off your head would be worth one hundred points.”

Yonkichi did not agree with Brunhild, but he did smile and reply.

“Your prize then would be the Concept Core and the past we hold.”

“Is that so? But why do you want to die so badly?”

“Die? That may be the case, but we have no time.”

“No time?”

“Yes,” he replied while glancing toward Hiba and Mikage’s collapsed forms and Thunder Fellow in the distance. “We four brothers age as we lose interest. And if we die before accepting this world as entertaining enough to leave the Concept Core to, that Concept Core will be destroyed.”

“Then the best option would be for you all to enjoy yourselves and die.”

“Yes,” agreed Yonkichi with a look into the sky. “I had thought there was no chance of that, but it seems some hope remains. I fought with no explanation this time, so I assume the next encounter can be more serious. However, I do not want to be seen as going

easy on you, so I will leave you with this.”

His smile deepened and he swung up his remaining right arm along with the Great Sage.

“Goodbye.”

As soon as he clenched his fist, destruction burst overhead.

It covered a radius of one hundred meters. The center burst in the forest beyond the open-air dojo and it almost looked like the earth’s crust was breaking.

Simply put, the ground collapsed.

“————!?”

The Hiba dojo, house, open-air dojo, and forest were all broken to pieces, thrown about, and crumbled.

In an instant, everything gathered into piles.

Only the morning wind remained.

Only that wind which told of the change from early morning to morning.

Chapter 13

“The World’s Expression”

It is hidden
And it is trampled on
It then flatly vanishes without bending

●

The sunlight was shifting to afternoon.

The sky was clear and the air was still.

The westering sun was accompanied by the scent of the ocean as someone ran down an asphalt slope.

It was Shinjou.

Her long black hair danced while tied back in a ribbon, the bottom of her orange jacket swayed, and the bag on her back and her skirt hopped up with each running step.

"I need to hurry."

She held copy paper with the Sakai municipal office's stamp on it. It contained the information on volunteer centers and churches she had received at that municipal office.

She saw a mountain to the east and the city and port bordering the Seto Inland Sea to the west.

A faded sign for tourists was set up halfway up the slope. It indicated that Sakai's port was located down below.

About two hours before, she had received quite a bit of information at the municipal office.

…But a lot happened before that.

She had arrived in Osaka in the early morning.

She had left the night train at Osaka Station and looked up at a train station's route map for the first time.

It had also been her first time to check with a station attendant despite standing right in front of the proper platform and her first time unfolding her map despite being on the right road.

…I don't know anything about the world and I'm really not used to travelling.

By the time she had finally managed to reach the Sakai municipal office, it had been just before nine in the morning. The office had yet to open, so she ate a light breakfast at a nearby café and then faced the morning congestion inside the office.

…I went there to get a list of orphanages or churches.

According to the document in Izumo UCAT, Shinjou Yukio had been left with an orphanage church in Sakai.

She had asked for city documents from before the earthquake, but she had received a certain response.

“There is no complete documentation from before or after the earthquake.”

…You’re kidding.

These were records for something as large-scale as a city and yet they did not exist.

This was mostly due to the old municipal office burning down, but that was not all: the landscape had changed during the earthquake, a lot of people had left the city, a lot had come to the city, and a lot of documentation had simply stopped being updated partway through.

The city’s newer documents were updated much more frequently because the government had decided to fully digitize everything in 2002, but the old paper documents were barely even treated as documents anymore.

Shinjou recalled the explanation given by the woman at the municipal office.

“Things like real estate and banks were linked with other information and completed in order to preserve the bare minimum of the old information needed to keep everything running. But… there’s some information that we can get by without, right? We wanted to put the people at ease and recover as quickly as possible, so we got the office back up and running even if it meant abandoning a fair bit of information. After all, the sooner the office was back to normal, the sooner we could bring back public order and the city administration.”

“…”

“The people who lost their houses in the large-scale landslides abandoned their destroyed land and moved. A lot of people did the same with the houses they lost in fires. There is documentation for the people who did report the loss, but the city bought up the land of those who lost everything or the land that is too dangerous to live on. There was so much confusion at the time that a lot is still unknown. Even now, people will find their old land was mistakenly registered as their neighbor’s.”

The woman had sighed and apologized.

…That could normally never happen.

It had happened so easily because the situation had needed to advance even if everything was not perfect.

The problem was how to compensate when it did happen. That was the most effect way of using your time and effort and this city still had no time or effort to spare.

In another decade or two, they would likely have become a city that could immediately answer Shinjou's question.

Shinjou did know one thing.

According to the research she had done before the trip, a quarter of the city's population of eight hundred thousand had arrived after the earthquake.

Numerically, that was two hundred thousand people.

In ten years, a full quarter of the city had been remade, including the residents themselves.

"Those people came here to help with the trouble that still remains. The office was in such a rush back then that we couldn't handle everything. …Just the other day, some people came from another prefecture after finally deciding to visit their relatives' graves."

As she spoke, the woman had made the list of churches.

There were about forty of them.

"There are probably street corner churches and ones using prefabricated buildings left over after the earthquake. The places that registered or moved when the phone lines were down often didn't bother writing down their phone number. And during the phone number changes the year before last, the areas with phone lines cut by the faults were given entirely new numbers, but…"

"But the change might not have been recorded here?"

"That would normally never happen, but we're still dealing with the disaster. So…"

The woman had handed over a few pieces of copy paper.

They contained a few phone numbers, addresses, and group names.

"These are the earthquake volunteer offices. I don't know if they're still running, though. We made sure they could work without having to register their activities with the city."

Shinjou had taken that list and was now hurrying along.

She had a reason to hurry. After leaving the municipal office, she had eaten lunch at a café and called UCAT.

…Ooki-sensei was the one to answer.

The woman had insisted nothing had happened and that everything was fine.

That was a lie, she thought. *Something happened.*

…She would normally unintentionally say something that made me worry.

However, Ooki had immediately said everything was fine and that nothing had happened.

Something must have happened to Heo, Harakawa, Hiba, or Mikage after the phone call the night before.

Pain suddenly filled her stomach.

This intermittent pain had begun in the morning and it was the same pain she had at the end of every month in place of a period. Perhaps due to her worried stress, it was especially bad today.

Even so, she ran. She needed to quickly finish this personal business and return. She intended to return on the bullet train the following morning.

…I can complete today's tasks as long as I have the time. I will eventually find Shinjou Yukio.

That fact eliminated the pain in her stomach.

She was pursuing someone who might not even be her relative, but she would limit that personal business to this one day. Heo and Ooki had both told her to do her best, so she would do what she could.

However, today was the only day for that.

She would use this one day for herself, but then she would return to her proper place and act alongside those who were with her.

And once that proper place was safe, she could act for herself once again.

A late-night bullet train could reach Tokyo this same day.

With that thought, she let out a breath.

"This one is the largest volunteer office. I'll start there!"

The address was near the entrance to Sakai's port. Apparently, the largest volunteer office had existed there from the earliest stages in order to process the relief goods. It was at the top of the list she had received at the municipal office.

If she went there, she would be able to gather the broadest range of information.

Her running feet took her down the slope to the port.

The sea air seemed to sting her skin and smelled somehow nostalgic. This was the scent of the Seto Inland Sea she had experienced during the summer.

The road reached a T-intersection. The road continuing right and left was wide and something came into view beyond the guardrail across that road.

"The sea."

She saw the back of the port's wharf beyond the slope's T-intersection.

She was in an elevated area, so she was able to look down on the Seto Inland Sea.

The sea almost looked black and it reflected the pale late autumn sun like a fish's scales. She saw the lines of ships parting those scales and realized the sight before her eyes was much larger than she had thought.

…It's so big.

She looked down and saw the wharf was brand new.

She recalled what Kazami had told her on the helicopter ride to the Seto Inland Sea during the summer.

"Back then…"

After the Great Kansai Earthquake, IAI had provided large-scale support for a recovery.

They had built an artificial island and all of the transportation routes – whether by land, sea, or air – had run from there.

The coastal port would have been remade at that time and then officially built even later.

The city had been made new, but that new city filled Shinjou with a certain emotion.

…It scares me.

The old things were disappearing. One day, those things would suddenly vanish and something new would take their place.

A quarter of the city's population was made up of people who had arrived after the earthquake. They would of course know about the earthquake, but…

…They don't know what actually happened beneath their feet or in the places they can see.

I'm the same, she thought, but then a memory of the past came to her.

She remembered the firebombing of Tokyo.

While in Shinjuku during the Leviathan Road with 2nd-Gear, she had seen the moment in the past when the city of Tokyo had been burned away.

The city and so much else had been lost then and replaced later.

The Concept War was similar.

Many Gears had vanished and the survivors were being replaced here in Low-Gear.

Thanks to her classes, her textbooks, the newspapers, and the TV news, Shinjou knew this country had fought a war.

She had looked through quite a bit of historical information in the library since she had started attending school.

Even so, she did not know what was buried beneath her feet.

Even so, she did not know if the scenery around her was the same as it had once been.

Even so…

…I don't know my father or my mother.

She had already thought about this after the dream of the past Baku had given her the day before.

In the dream, Sayama's parents had rushed though the burning city of Osaka.

…But what were they fighting?

The remains of their battle might lie beneath her feet as she walked through this city that had been destroyed in an earthquake.

…And are my parents down there, too?

"————!?"

She shuddered and woke from her thoughts.

She wanted to cling to someone, but that someone was not with her. And she only realized that because…

"I'm trying to cling to him."

He was not here. Everything was back to the way it had been.

It was the same as when she had been alone in UCAT for so long.

"But it's different now."

She had somewhere to return to, so she could go outside. She had someone to cling to for support, so she could leave him for the time being. She had no parents, so she was searching for them. It was all perfectly natural. And so…

"Here I go."

She faced the T-intersection and her gaze settled on the ocean beyond it. She trembled a bit from the unease trying to control her, but it was weak enough that she could still move.

“Here I go!”

The road to the right continued down the slope to the port’s entrance.

She began to run to the bottom of the slope while watching the Seto Inland Sea rise to her left. She ran to the port and her goal.

The firmness of her footsteps on the asphalt helped her control the tremble in her heart.

…It’ll be okay.

It would take time, but she could continue pursuing Shinjou Yukio.

In the same way, she would eventually find her parents.

Suddenly, something rose up from the left side of the slope.

It was a green two-story prefabricated building. It had a large gray storehouse behind it.

“!”

The prefabricated roof was covered with stacks of plywood panels and on top of blue sheets and lumber.

The green corrugated iron wall had the words “Great Kansai Earthquake Sakai Port Relief Office” written in black spray paint.

“…!”

Shinjou sped up.

She was now racing down the hill more than she was running.

Eventually, her legs could not keep up and wide gaps appeared between footsteps.

She was almost leaping as she made her way down the slope.

She circled around the guardrail and into the open area at the port entrance.

Beyond the people running transport vehicles and forklifts, she saw the wharf that was now level with her.

She heard cranes moving, vehicles beeping as they backed up, many different voices, and countless engines.

The smell of salt water was strong.

However, she ignored it all.

She moved left as if reversing her downward momentum and she threw her body toward the prefab building.

The building was less than ten meters from the port entrance.

She imagined knocking on the door, giving a greeting, and entering to walk across the somewhat soft floor. She pictured a man or woman like the one at the municipal office.

"…Eh?"

Her imagination stopped there.

And that was not all that had stopped. Her legs, her momentum, and the strength in her gaze had all stopped as well.

She simply faced forward.

She looked to the prefab building in front of her.

"It's…closed?"

●

Shinjou saw a closed door.

Beyond the glass on the upper half of the aluminum sash door was a curtain faded to white by the sun.

No light could be seen beyond the curtain.

"…"

Her feet suddenly moved and brought her closer.

She stepped up on the block used in place of a front step.

"Excuse me…"

She called out and knocked on the door.

The glass shook and the corrugated iron wall audibly bent a little.

She waited a few seconds, but there was no response.

Unable to endure the silence, she spoke.

"Um."

She lightly knocked on the door.

"Excuse me."

She knocked.

"I have a question!"

But there was no response. All she heard was the shaking of the door and the bending of the corrugated iron.

After those sounds of her own creation vanished, she listened to the surrounding noises once more.

She heard the moving cranes, the beeping of transport vehicles backing up, people's voices, and running engines. Those sounds of the city permeated her from behind.

Her silhouette was reflected in the window with the somewhat dulled sunlight in the background. It was reflected in the darkness

beyond the curtain.

"Um…"

With that weak call, she peered inside.

There was nothing there.

No, there was something. Blue sheets were laid out on the plastic floor, plywood panels were piled up, and a few folding chairs were stacked on top of those.

She also saw color on the ceiling.

…Chains of colored paper?

They must have been celebrating something because several chains of colored paper were still hanging from the ceiling.

That was all. She could see nothing else.

"…"

She took a step back and found nothing there.

She completely forgot she had been standing on a block.

"Ah."

She fell onto her butt.

Looking up at the door from the ground, she noticed something.

A piece of paper had been stuck on the inside of the door's glass in front of the faded curtain.

Still sitting, she looked at the paper that had also faded. She read aloud the large writing printed off from a word processor.

"Exactly nine years have passed since the earthquake and we are entering the tenth year. We have long received support, but the time for widespread material relief efforts has ended. We believe it is now time for local support, efforts of the recovering city administration, and moral support."

…When we opened this office, we decided we could not continue running it for a full decade. Not because we could not keep it up but because we could not allow the earthquake to take a full decade of our lives from us. We were determined to take back our lives before a decade had passed.

"We lost so very much, but the people in temporary housing have all been moved to permanent homes and the city's population was reported to have surpassed the pre-earthquake number last year. We are viewing that as a sign that we have truly retrieved our lives, so we have decided to close up before entering the tenth year. From now on, local areas will handle their own problems. We would like

to thank all of you for the support you have provided us for so long. We are praying for the happiness of those lost in the earthquake, those lost in the recovery, and those who live on."

The date it gave was the end of the previous year. After that, it gave contact information said to have been valid through March of this year, phone numbers of local volunteer offices, and the phone number for the municipal office.

And that was all.

…What is this?

She knew.

The municipal office was still dealing with the aftermath of the earthquake, but the large-scale disaster relief stage had already ended.

After ten years, the land had been restored, houses had been built, the city had been made into a place for people to live once more, and the population numbers had returned.

The main issue in the current stage was administrative troubles.

"…"

Still sitting on the ground, she suppressed the emotions welling up in her heart.

While restraining her heart, doubts filled her mind as words.

…Is the past being replaced by the present?

She did not know what had been below her feet or in the places she could see around her.

It had all been replaced with new things.

"And even if you try to remember the past and record it, the memories feel fresh yet you can't go that far."

She would eventually learn about the past, but that was a long time from now.

By then, she would have nothing left connecting her to that past.

Part of her thought that was fine, but she also shook her head.

"I'm standing in the divide between the past and a new era."

As she muttered those words, something thin and hard fell onto the back of the right hand she had placed on the ground.

She looked down and found the envelope Sayama had given her.

He had given it to her while saying he was leaving her with a piece of his past and it seemed to have slipped from the opening of her backpack.

…The envelope makes itself known as forcefully as its sender.

Feeling like she was being embraced by the one who had left it with her, she picked it up.

If she let this break her, she would never be able to read it.

Right, she thought while gathering strength.

Suddenly, a man called out to her from the wharf.

“Hey! That place isn’t running anymore! You should head to the municipal office!”

“R-right!”

She stood up, turned around, and found a man raising his hand in a group of men walking between warehouses. The gesture seemed to be telling her to keep trying.

She bowed and turned around. She grabbed the backpack, put the envelope away, and pulled out another document. It was the list of volunteer offices and churches.

She looked down at it and took a deep breath.

“Calm down.”

She had run all the way here, but now that she thought about it, she had been in too much of a hurry.

She could only think the anxiety and hope of her first trip alone had mixed together and excited her.

She was nervous, but she could do what she needed to do.

Before she returned to Tokyo the following morning, she wanted to grasp a part of her past that would otherwise be forgotten. That way she could use that part to drag out the past when she eventually came here again.

…I need to think.

She put the bag on her back and began to walk with the papers in hand.

“How can I most efficiently check all of them?”

●

The sky was a little bit cloudy.

A girl and a white dog walked through the faint shadows cast on a road.

They were Shino and Shiro.

While walking along the wide sidewalk, Shino checked the sign hanging below the street’s traffic light.

…Akigawa.

This had been a long walk.

She lived in Hachioji to the south of Akigawa, but the cities were only directly connected by road and several mountains divided them. She had taken the train, so she had been forced to travel through Tachikawa or Haijima station.

This walk could be called a short trip.

She saw no problem in bringing Shiro with her. He cast no shadow, but it was an overcast day.

He was an information being, but he generally treated the walls and ground as solid to match Shino.

He would always "hide" somewhere on the trains out of concern for her.

Whenever she passed through the ticket gate, he would vanish and he would reappear by her side once she left the ticket gate.

He had learned to hide after she had tried to take him with her and gotten into an argument with the station attendant.

She did not know how it worked, but it was probably completely normal for him.

Currently, he was allowing himself to be seen as she walked alongside him.

She had passed by the municipal office earlier and she was now walking right into the wind blowing down from the north.

A long wall continued to her right.

"That's Taka-Akita Academy, isn't it?"

She always saw those buildings when she came to Akigawa. In fact, one could say the facility was Akigawa itself.

A group in white approached from up ahead.

…?

She reflexively grew defensive, but she realized it was a group of girls in white track suits.

A female teacher drove a car behind them while shouting to set their tempo.

"C'mon, you have to help prepare for the festival and you still have normal classes until midday."

"Ah, I wish we were in Ooki-sensei's class. They have a self-study day today."

The teacher gave a bitter smile as she responded to the student's

exasperated comment.

"C'mon, you delinquent students. Don't you know Ooki-san goes to the trouble of teaching supplementary lessons? Of course, that's to make up for how often she's late."

Laughter spilled out and the entire group picked up speed.

That was for a PE class, so they were likely running a long distance. Shino waited for the footsteps and voices to approach.

"————"

She and Shiro watched them pass by.

Most of the students had their heads drooping and were weakly leaning forward as they propelled their bodies in the same direction. Shino imagined they were sick of running.

A few of them softened their expressions as they looked at her and Shiro, but…

"C'mon, quit looking to the side. You're gonna trip."

What's wrong with that, thought Shino while watching them pass by.

But at the same time…

…That may be true.

She did not know what a life like theirs was like.

She had never lived a life like theirs.

She could not live a life like theirs.

They lived in the same world, they were both human, they were from the same generation, they wore the same sort of clothes, they ate the same kinds of food, they breathed the same air, and they experienced the same time, but something was different on a fundamental level.

…How long will this last?

"Shiro, let's go."

When would she be able to call herself a "normal" person?

She recalled what Hajji had said.

…When we crush UCAT and wipe out the last remnants of the Concept War.

She began to walk into the blowing north wind with Shiro by her side.

She walked beside that wall she could never enter.

"Shiro, Hajji told me something. Army's attack tonight will change tomorrow morning. The morning will change in some fundamental

way that the rest of the world doesn't know about. Nothing else will change, but the victors known as UCAT will vanish and the world will belong equally to everyone."

She rubbed Shiro's head while walking alongside him.

"People want to avenge the past or avenge what was lost, but with the target of that vengeance gone, they will have no excuses left and will have no reason left to fight. …It may take time, but we will all be able to live together in the same world, as identical humans, in the same generation, while wearing the same sort of clothes, while eating the same kinds of food, while breathing the same air, and while experiencing the same time."

She looked down at the dog's walking feet. They scraped on the asphalt, but he did not cast a shadow.

"Will I be able to live with you too, Shiro? Even if nothing else changes, if the rulers vanish, then eventually…"

They reached the wide main entrance, but she did not peek inside the school.

She turned her back, crossed the road, and continued on.

Shiro must have remembered the way because he walked on ahead.

It was true she had taken Shiro this way a few times before. She would sometimes come here without telling anyone else. Hajji seemed to have a hunch, but Mikoku only thought she was going to some distant place for fun.

…Should I really be doing this?

They had all been given some free time because this was the day of the attack, but Mikoku was training on her own to make up for losing to Jord the night before.

On the other hand, Shino had come here. She was using her free time for herself.

…But all I've been doing is thinking.

"Sorry, Shiro. We can go to the usual central park later."

He turned back toward her and gave a small bark.

She felt like he was trying to cheer her up, so she smiled.

She walked between the houses lining the road and saw thin clouds in the sky.

The clouds were supposed to clear by nightfall, but she wondered if they really would.

She also had another thought.

…What will happen once the attack is over?

Whether they won or lost, a lot would change.

…But one thing will return to normal.

"Mikoku."

The girl would no longer have to tell Shino not to fight.

In fact, Shino would be the one telling Mikoku they no longer needed to fight.

She could not wait for that to happen.

She wanted all the fighting to end and for Mikoku to not be so upset all the time.

"…"

She slowly came to a stop.

At the same time, she heard an electronic chime and a voice behind her.

"The festival committee will now announce the beginning of today's school festival preparations and would like to give some warnings. Let's see… First, when riding a bicycle, motorcycle, or car onto school grounds, make sure your license is displayed in a visible place. Second, 'I couldn't resist any longer' is no excuse for making the preparations in the nude. And third, if anyone else tries to sell stimulants at increased prices in the cafeteria, the committee's purge division will…"

Shino simply sighed without even turning toward the voice.

"Ahh."

She began to walk away from the sounds behind her and the people creating them.

"It will all be over soon and then I can be with Mikoku and the others."

She had waited for so long, but that wait would end tonight and she would have all her answers by morning.

She briefly closed her eyes and nodded.

…If I…

"If I had been like Shinjou-san, I wouldn't have had to wait for the new world," she muttered. "If only I had been someone irreplaceable."

She looked up and faced forward.

There, she saw what lay in front of Shiro as he sat and waited for

her.

It was a large house surrounded by a long fence.

She walked toward the wooden gate and saw a nameplate that said “Tamiya”.

“I came here again…”

Her voice sounded both resigned and exasperated.

A moment later, a female voice reached her from beyond the gate.

“Like! I! Said!!”

The tone of protest made Shino gasp.

She wondered what was going on and the voice travelled through the gate once again.

“Honestly, Kouji. Why are you such a stubborn boy!?”

●

A young man and woman faced each other in the Tamiya family yard.

The woman wore a blue kimono and the man wore a gray suit.

The man spoke to the woman whose eyebrows were raised.

“Fine, fine. Just calm down, my sister. Besides, you shouldn’t be calling your brother a ‘boy’ when he’s past twenty.”

“Then I’ll level you up to a stubborn man. Or I could say you were ‘born stubborn’ to make it rhyme.”

“Ha ha ha. They may be spelled the same, but they don’t actually rhyme. …Anyway, you need to spend some time in the storehouse thinking about what you did. I can’t believe you would give the young master some of our special drugs.”

“But he and Setsu-chan are like family. What’s wrong with giving them some of our drugs?”

“Those are for business! They’re for the guests in the confinement room down below. Just because mom and dad are on a hot spring excavation tour in the hopes that Mount Aso will erupt doesn’t mean you can just take some.”

“But, but, but. Won’t this help advance their relationship? Do you really not get it, Kouji?”

The woman, Ryouko, sighed while striking a pose like it had started to rain.

“They’re going to be apart for a little bit, so they’re just using

some drugs to excite themselves and get them through the rebound. There's nothing wrong with this. And if it goes well, it means I was their Cu-Cu-Cu-Cupi-…"

"Cupid. You can't even say that right?"

"I-I just stuttered a little. I don't remember raising a man who would gripe about something so trivial! …And if you don't like it, try saying some profound thing yourself!"

"I'd really like a peaceful everyday life."

"That's definitely not happening."

"Why is that the only time you give a serious answer!? …And you're the reason it isn't happening!"

After Kouji shouted, his shoulders drooped.

"Anyway, sister, I would also like to say I wasn't raised to be like that, but don't forget that a large part of my personality was formed by cleaning up after your mistakes."

"Wh-what? Are you saying it's my fault you're like this?'

"About 80% your fault, yes."

"You mean you have 80% of a sister complex!? Oh, you poor thing! You're definitely dangerous!"

"Calm down 100%, my sister. How in the world did you reach that conclusion?"

"Don't try to deny it!" Ryouko pointed at Kouji and raised her voice. "There's nothing wrong with having a sister complex. With a sister this attractive, it isn't something to be embarrassed about. After all, even the single and unemployed son of Ishii-san who lives cattycorner of here has been spying on me with binoculars!"

A second-story window on the house diagonally behind Ryouko quickly closed, but they heard someone stomping up the stairs followed by screams and sounds of impacts in one room on the second story.

Ryouko sighed toward the ground.

"Well, with as many pheromones as I produce, I guess I can't blame you for having a sister complex. You can have one if you want. After all, I'm the one that finds it disgusting, not you."

"I'm going to ignore that misunderstanding and how you destroyed peace in the neighborhood, but you are amazingly individualistic, sister."

"Yes, but Kouji? Did you really see your sister like that?"

“Yes. About four times a year, I would tell myself I didn’t want to turn out like you.”

“You made a quarterly habit out of it!? …You’re the worst, Kouji. Instead of just thinking things again and again, you need to make actual changes in your life.”

“Then can I go on a trip? Maybe one that lasts three years?”

“Fine, but make sure to clean my room first. And once you get back, you’ll have to clean the three years’ worth of messiness. And that isn’t mandatory; it’s an order.”

“Those are the same thing! And what kind of sister makes her younger brother clean her room!?”

“Now you’re ignoring our familial bonds? You really are the worst! I’m not putting up with this.”

She turned around, slid the gate’s latch to the side, and pulled it open.

She opened it with all her might and looked over her shoulder at Kouji.

“I’m going to work and you can’t stop me! I’m going to get rich and use all my money to show you who’s better! I’ll slap you with a pile of cash and make you cry.”

“I’m sorry, sister, but all of the money you earn goes right into the company vault.”

“A-are you embezzling it!? …Huh?”

Ryouko saw a girl and a dog through the gap of the opening gate.

Seeing the surprised look on the girl’s face, Ryouko’s own look of surprise changed to a smile.

“Oh, my.” She placed a hand on her cheek. “Are you preparing for the school festival? You are, aren’t you? Are you from the young master’s class?”

Chapter 14

“Forming Thoughts”

They won’t overlook it anyway

●

Shino sat in a large room.

The western end of the room opened onto a yard with a pond.

The other three sides were covered by sliding screens and a table for about ten people sat in the light of the cloudy sky.

She sat perfectly still on a cushion with her shoulders stiffened.

Behind her, a white dog sat on the large stone step up from the yard.

A bone sat on a plate in front of the dog.

The white dog sniffed at the bone.

“Shiro! Not yet! Not until they say we can!”

Shino had sensed Shiro’s movements and he corrected his posture.

About twelve square meters in front of her, the screen slid open just a bit.

The slight gap closed again and she heard whispering voices from the other side.

“B-brother! Brother! Who is that girl? Who is she?”

“You don’t know? You really are stupid. Listen. The president said she was bringing in a newcomer, remember? We need to be nice to her. She’s been taken in just like us brothers.”

“Wow, brother! You sure are kind! I can see why you’re called Take the Prayer Killer!”

The girl lowered her head as she heard a few more whispering voices.

“What is going on?”

She had a blue stone and a red pendant hanging from her neck and she reached for the blue one.

Just as she prepared to say she was leaving, a young man’s footsteps and voice reached her from the hallway.

“Okay, okay. We have work tonight, everyone, so go get some rest. And this guest seems to be a friend from the young master and Setsu-kun’s school.”

“Got it!”

Several voices answered and a variety of footsteps, dragging sounds, and metallic noises moved left down the hallway.

There had apparently been far more people than voices.

The girl raised her head and let go of the blue stone.

The sliding screen opened and a young man walked in with a tray of snacks. He wore a black shirt and a gray suit.

“These persimmons were grown in our yard, but I’m not sure if you’ll like them. Or do you not like persimmons in general?”

“No, I like them.”

He crouched next to her and placed a few plates in front of her. They contained persimmons, pears, youkan, and a few rice cakes.

“My name is Kouji and this is my family’s house. What is your name?”

“Oh…It’s Shino.”

He nodded and stood up with the empty tray in hand.

“I see. And what brings you here today?”

“Um…”

She hesitated and he sat across the table from her.

It had been his sister who had mistakenly thought she was a friend of Sayama’s, but she was unsure if she should say so.

She was basing her decision on whether she should do anything unnecessary during such an important time.

She had been seen in UCAT during the summer, so if the details of her visit reached Sayama, he would think a member of the Army had come to visit him.

…Should I say I don’t know him and that this man’s sister was wrong?

If so, it could all end as that sister’s mistake.

Then she could leave as quickly as possible and leave behind as little evidence of her visit as possible.

That was why she tried to say this was a mistake and she had simply not had a chance to say so.

But…

“…”

Once she opened her mouth, she realized something.

…But in that case, how do I explain stopping in front of their house?

The answer to that question quickly came to her.

“Um, to be honest, I was just worried about the sibling argument I overheard.”

Kouji’s expression changed at that.

"Oh?"

His eyebrows rose, he removed the lid of the teacup in front of him, and gestured for her to do the same.

"Then I apologize. Were you in the middle of a walk? And are you not a friend of our young master, but a simple passerby who my sister invited in?"

He gave her all the help she needed, so relief filled her.

If she expressed that relief, the man would likely assume he was right, so she breathed a sigh of relief and brought a hand to her chest.

"Y-yes, that's right. I just so happened to end up here while going for a walk. I'm not a friend of your Sayama."

"I see."

Kouji took a sip of his tea, lowered his gaze a little, and made a sudden comment.

"How did you know that our young master was named Sayama?"

●

Oh, no, gasped Shino.

…He was testing me.

A tremor ran down her back and she turned her senses toward her surroundings.

…Ah.

A few of the sliding screens to the front and sides were cracked open. Shiro showed no sign of moving behind her because he had noticed a presence in the yard, not because she had told him to stay.

The whispering she had heard before and the obvious sounds of people leaving had been intentional.

…Did they want me to think everyone had left?

Kouji sat across the large and thick ebony table.

If she was going to move, she would have to head for the unseen sliding screen beyond him or rush out into the yard.

She felt scorching impatience race along her spine.

Oh, no, she thought again, but it was no use because she had already failed.

She could only struggle or surrender.

She could not choose the latter, so she had no choice but to choose the former.

There were two ways she could struggle: physically struggle or negotiate to keep the damage to a minimum.

She took a breath to calm herself and chose to continue negotiating.

…Um…

Kouji had set up a single trap for her: why did she know who Sayama was despite not being from his school.

"Well…"

She tilted her head.

"Sayama of the Tamiya family is well known."

"I see."

Kouji nodded as if he had accepted that.

But Shino decided he had not truly accepted it and it was just for show. She used that decision as an excuse to herself and clenched the hand held to her chest. It wrapped around the blue stone hanging from her neck.

…I'm sorry.

"Please believe me."

She lowered her head as she spoke and blue light escaped from between her fingers.

The philosopher's stone answered her request by releasing its power. Its concept could control people's wills.

"…"

This would affect the thoughts of the people around her without them even noticing.

Its use could permanently affect their string vibrations, so its influence would sometimes remain for a long time.

She knew this was wrong and that it was a terrible thing.

…But I can't afford to fail now.

She had to use this power because of her own mistake. Reminded of her own inexperience, she swore to never have to do this again.

She then looked up.

A moment later, she heard sounds from around her.

A slight movement of wind brought the sounds from beyond the sliding screens, above the ceiling, and below the floor.

"See, brother! I told you a beauty would never betray us!"

"You really are stupid. I knew that from the beginning. I was just testing you."

“Wow, you’re amazing, brother! You’re like a prophet!”

The same voices that had previously moved away in the hallway were now moving away below the floor. Shino’s back trembled again.

…Amazing.

She faced forward and looked at Kouji.

She had assumed he was suspecting her and only pretending to have accepted her explanation.

“Eh?”

But that accepting expression remained intact.

Ah, she silently gasped.

After all, if his expression had not changed…

…The idea that he was pretending to trust me was only my imagination.

He had not doubted her.

“…”

The truth before her eyes made her gulp.

Her own suspicion had led her to control his unsuspecting mind.

…No.

Had he left the suspicion to everyone else and simply tried to hear what she had to say?

And yet she had used her philosopher’s stone on a normal person just because he had asked one little question.

She felt the heat of her impatience grow icily cold.

…How could this happen?

They lived in the same world, they were both human, they were from the same generation, they wore the same sort of clothes, they ate the same kinds of food, they breathed the same air, and they experienced the same time, but something was different on a fundamental level.

But this time…

…I went out of my way to do something different.

Hadn’t she wanted to be the same as them?

Unease filled her mind because she had suspected someone else for no good reason.

…When did I turn into someone who would do that?

I can’t do that, she told herself while lowering her head.

“Are you okay?” asked Kouji.

She tried to answer, but she ended up biting her lip and holding in the words.

After all, his mind was under the influence of her philosopher's stone.

…It isn't really him that's concerned for me.

She forced strength into her shaking legs and stood up.

"Sorry."

Without raising her head, she started toward the passageway along the outside of the house.

While making sure he could not see her lowered face, she turned her back so he would not feel any more insincere worry for her.

"Excuse me. I will be leaving."

"Oh, if you leave that way, the path through the center is a little-…"

"I know. I turn at the corner to head inside, turn left because the right is a dead end, and open the third sliding screen to reach the entrance, right?"

She heard Kouji stand.

"Why do you know our house's layout?"

She turned toward him and forced a smile with the yard and cloudy sky behind her.

"You should know tomorrow… Or at least, I should be able to accept it."

That was all she said before waving a hand upwards.

"Shiro, we're leaving."

She heard Shiro running in the yard. She also heard the guard dogs begin to move, but an information entity like him could hide and move quite quickly.

It will be okay, she told herself while touching the philosopher's stone on her chest.

"I'm sorry."

Apologizing is all I ever do, she thought while deciding to never return.

If she was gone, the contamination of their minds would mean nothing.

…I just have to never come back. I hope they can forget me.

She could not erase their memories, so she did not go that far.

"Please do not worry about me."

She spoke to the stone and turned her back on Kouji.

She began to walk along the path to leave the Tamiya house and enter the cloudy sunlight.

She moved quickly and spoke quietly while looking up into the white sky.

“Farewell.”

●

A certain space was filled with white steam.

The thirty square meter space was surrounded by walls and white smoke rose within it.

The words “Healing Bath – Green (Pseudonym)” were written on one wall.

The other three walls contained mosaics depicting the final chapter of Tomorrow’s Realtor, a hot-blooded shoujo manga. Below those were the washing areas and mirrors.

True to the name on the wall, below the steam and surrounded by the washing areas and mirrors was a ten square meter area of hot water that had been turned green.

The water was divided between four large tubs lined up in two row of two.

The people in the back left tub were looking at the mosaics on the three walls.

There were three people in all.

A girl with long blonde hair sat in the center of the tub that included a green healing concept. A girl with short blonde hair and a woman with long gray hair sat on the stepped portion by the edge, soaking up to their waists.

The short-haired girl and the small animal on her head looked up at the final panel of the mosaics. A man in a suit was letting out an emotional breath despite having turned pure white.

“That’s amazing, teacher. At the end, the yakuza boss shouts ‘Get it up! Get that apartment building up!’ and he decides to buy up all the land.”

“Yes, Heo, I was moved too. And next week, they’re beginning the period drama manga 24 Hours in the Life of the Forty-Seven Ronin. It’s full of classic scenes like the one where Ooishi Kuranosuke thinks about quitting, comes back to his senses because he doesn’t

want his comrades to die, and has to be held back by the others."

Heo thought to herself while listening.

…She really knows a lot about this.

She looked at the long-haired girl whose head was sticking out of the water in the center of the tub.

"Mikage, you'll make yourself pass out if you stay there."

"Right. But I found one."

"Eh?"

Before Heo could ask what she meant, Mikage pulled something up from the bottom of the tub.

It brought a lot of water with it.

"A plant creature?"

It was a 4th-Gear resident.

Its body was fairly long, its legs were fin-shaped, and it shook its head as Mikage lifted it up in her arms.

"Cold," it said.

"Right. Sorry."

Mikage sank back into the water so only her head stuck out, but the plant creature was with her this time. It wiggled its long body to swim and bring Mikage toward Heo and Diana.

More interested in the approaching creature than Mikage, Heo reached out her hand.

Just as she was about to reach it, the water swelled up below her hand.

"Eh?"

Mikage held onto the one creature as she sat next to Heo, but another one poked its head up below Heo's hand.

It poked at her palm with its nose and Baku hopped from her head to the plant creature's nose.

Heo wondered what they were going to do and the creature swam along while tossing Baku into the air with its nose.

Baku did not resist and instead enjoyed pretending to swim through the air.

The two creatures seemed like a good match.

Heo spotted a few more plant creatures playing by tossing a bucket back and forth with their noses.

They began passing Baku as well and he flew about along with the sprays of water the plant creatures created.

…Wow.

Heo began to applaud and she realized Diana was looking at her with a smile. Having such a familiar person watching her made her blush a little.

“U-um, what is it?”

“Heo, are you having fun?”

Heo then remembered why she was here.

That morning, they had fought Yonkichi, lost, and been caught in a landslide.

Thunder Fellow had cancelled their combination, so she had not been damaged by the landslide. However, the earlier tumbling that had knocked over the trees had been a different story.

The armor had displaced and buffered against the impact, so she had not been badly injured. Still, she had gained some bruises and scrapes. UCAT had quickly retrieved them and the morning had been spent healing them and examining them. She had taken healing medication in place of lunch and Diana had brought her and Mikage here.

Hiba had broken some ribs, but he had not been otherwise injured because the house had ridden atop the landslide. He had been given charms to set the ribs in place and heal them and then he had left for school.

Mikage was almost entirely unharmed because Hiba had protected her, but…

“Is Harakawa okay?”

He had apparently been bruised and whiplashed like her, but it seemed he had skipped out on his treatment early.

To her left, Diana laughed quietly and swept her damp hair backwards.

終わりのクロニクル

“How about we talk, Heo?”

She nodded and lined up next to Diana who was smiling with a towel wrapped around her.

“You saw Harakawa leave, didn’t you, teacher? Was he mad?”

“Why do you think he was?”

“Because I didn’t take the battle seriously enough. And that’s why-…”

“If he was angry with anyone, it was with himself.”

“Eh?”

Heo tilted her head.

“There’s something else you’re even more interested in, isn’t there?” asked Diana.

“Wh-what is that?”

“Well.” Diana nodded. “You have Baku with you and he showed you the past, didn’t he? …Do you have anything to ask me?”

●

Indirectly connected via the bathwater, the teacher asked her student a question.

“Don’t you want to ask about the Great Kansai Earthquake?”

“Yes.”

Heo lowered her head and gave a small nod.

…I want to know about my past and what led up to it.

What had happened to her parents?

What had happened in the city of Osaka?

What had happened in this world?

She wanted to ask all those things, but…

“Will you answer me, teacher?”

“To be honest, I can’t. We all decided to keep the events there a secret. But…”

Still facing forward, the witch crossed her legs in the water and rested her head on her hand.

“I can’t stop you from investigating it. And if you do find the truth, then I can only say that the past wanted to be known. But what about the past do you want to investigate?”

“I want to know what my parents were fighting in Osaka and why they were fighting.”

She pulled up her right knee and wrapped her arms around it.

"I'm thinking about why Sayama said Team Leviathan should disband. After all, I don't know what that reason is. It hasn't been long since I joined Team Leviathan…no, since I started fighting. But if I learned why my parents fought…"

"You think you could accept why you belong on Team Leviathan?"

She nodded.

She remembered the thought she had on the night when she had seen Black Sun vanish in the sky.

…I want to be like them.

"That is why I think I will investigate it. I will investigate and find the truth. I believe doing that will lead me to the reason I want."

"Do you know how to do that?"

"You won't answer even if I ask and I doubt Team Leviathan's supervisor would either."

"No, Itaru is probably the last one who would tell you. In which case-…"

Heo cut off Diana with words of her own.

"There are some people who look like they will tell us."

She raised her right hand from the green water and that hand's fingers had bandages attached.

The scrapes on her arm were vanishing, but some traces of the pain remained in her. She spoke as if to ensure she did not forget that pain.

"Those four brothers."

Those four wished for a fight. In all honesty, she did not like the idea of fighting someone who, even for a short time, had been an ally, but…

"We have to fight them."

"No, you don't."

Heo turned toward that opposite invitation and found Diana's smile.

"At the very least, I doubt your parents would want you to say that you have to fight."

She thought about what that meant, but she shook her head with the ends of her eyebrows lowered in a smile.

"Thank you, but I have another thought. If Team Leviathan had not disbanded and the others were with us, we might have been able to sort out the reason for that fight."

To help her gather her thoughts, she reached out her hands as if grasping at the air.

"Um… This morning, I hesitated and got hurt, but our opponents are fighting to eliminate their grudge. That's why these injuries were caused by my hesitation, not by their grudge. Now that I know that, I want to test myself."

She took a breath.

"I've never really fought someone, so I want to fight these people who wish to fight and I want to see if we can both find the answer we want."

"And if you find an answer you don't want?"

Heo smiled a little.

"If I am not prepared for that once we face each other, I think I will apologize to them and run away. I will apologize for being so inexperienced. Harakawa and the others might get mad at me, but it's better than finding an answer I don't want. And both Thunder Fellow and I are quite fast."

"You are," agreed Diana while rubbing her head.

The steam between her hair turned to water and weighed down that hair.

"In that case, you should focus on healing your wounds."

"I will. While they heal, I plan to make dinner for tonight. Once I finish with that, Harakawa and the others should be finished at school. And if we leave then…"

"The brothers will attack, right?"

"Yes. To look at it positively, the past we want will be coming to us. That's the opposite of Sayama and Shinjou who have to go search out their past. So if there is something we need to search out…"

She hesitated and felt she was going too far in saying this.

"It would be a battlefield and a way of defeating the past."

"Herrlich."

Heo looked up at Diana's word of praise.

She turned to her left and saw the same smile as when the woman had taught her long ago.

A moment later, she was embraced and had her head rubbed just as back then.

"An excellent answer, Heo. Heo Thunderson, daughter of Maria

Thunderson and James Thunderson, and my student. An excellent destiny comes to those who can give an excellent answer. And the time for investigation is nigh. Rest, heal your wounds, and calm yourself until then."

"B-but…"

"Heo, it is crucial that you do not rush this. Rushing and wasting time is no match for a single excellent answer. You already gave an excellent answer, so now you only need to prepare for it. …I know. How about you take a walk through UCAT until you go to meet him? It is filled with strange animals, so it is quite an amusing place."

"U-um, teacher."

"Hm? What is it, Heo? Are you still trying to rush this?"

"I can't breathe."

"Oh, dear."

Diana let go of Heo who had been buried in her breasts. Heo frantically breathed in and felt her cheeks flush. She then thought about what Diana had said.

"But…is this really okay? We may have to fight, but I already made Harakawa mad by being so inexperienced this morning."

Diana turned toward her with a smile.

"You'll be fine, Heo."

She looked past Heo to Mikage who sat to Heo's right.

"Isn't that right, Mikage?"

"Right. You will be fine."

"But…"

Heo turned around and saw Mikage stretching the plant creature's cheeks outwards.

The girl turned her clear blue eyes toward her and opened her lips.

"You will be fine. You and Harakawa just don't understand each other yet. You don't understand your pasts, what it means to fight, or some other things. …But that just means that you have to learn those things, so you'll be fine."

Mikage continued.

"The one that isn't fine is me."

"R-really? B-but Hiba has fallen for you so hard he's practically melted into a puddle on the floor. To me, it looks like he's a pathetic monkey."

"Yes, but…lately we haven't been taking baths together. What about you, Heo?"

Heo frantically shook her head and tensed her shoulders.

"I've…never even thought about doing that."

"Then you have a lot to look forward to."

Mikage released the green creature into the water and waved as it looked reluctantly back at her.

"Lately, I've evolved."

She brought her hands to her chest.

"The black lines are disappearing and color has filled in a lot of places. …I'm getting closer to being complete."

A blue stone was embedded in Mikage's chest, just below her neck. *That must be the philosopher's stone that brings about her evolution,* thought Heo.

…She's becoming human.

But the girl who was halfway between automaton and human smiled with the ends of her eyebrows lowered.

"But you know what? I'm a little scared."

"Of what? If you evolve and become human, you can be with Hiba, right?"

"But I won't change anymore."

The answer to her question made Heo gasp.

Once she was human, she could no longer "become human".

"What if Ryuuji-kun gets bored of me because I won't change anymore? And what if my body isn't what he was expecting? … That's why I don't want to let him see me. I used to let him see how different I was, but now…the thought of being different scares me."

"D-don't be. You have an excellent body and I don't think Hiba will complain."

"I don't know what Ryuuji-kun likes and he might not tell me even if he had a complaint."

"That's-…" began Heo, but she swallowed the words.

This was not something for her to decide. It was Mikage's issue.

However, Mikage smiled and narrowed her eyes.

"I doubt I am exactly what he wants. But that's why I plan to have him to tell me if he'll accept me and to praise the parts of me he likes. If he does, I think some of my fear of being seen will go away."

Oh, thought Heo as she thought about the mixture of hope and

anxiety filling Mikage's heart.

"Mikage, do you know what that mixture of hope and anxiety is called?"

"You mean this desire to show off what I really am and yet also to hide what I really am?"

"Yes."

Heo thought and tried to express the idea as accurately as possible.

"It is called shame… Ow! T-teacher, why did you just grab my chest from behind!?"

"Heo? You are an excellent student, but you sometimes overthink things."

However, Diana's hands did not leave her chest and they moved as if to tickle her.

"Hm? Heo, did you just say 'ow'?"

"Y-yes. What about it?"

Heo looked over her shoulder and saw Diana's smiling face.

"Pain is a sign that you are growing and the skin is tight. You are going to get bigger."

"Eh? R-really?"

Mikage looked at her from the right and applauded.

"You have room to evolve too, Heo. That's good. You still have a chance to gain what you lack."

"Why doesn't that make me happy?"

"Heo, answer me. Does the Harakawa boy like girls with large breasts?"

"Eh? P-probably. He always treats me like a child. …A-and I found some American dirty magazines in the back of his closet! He tried to claim Hiba asked for them, though! All of the girls in them were as big as you, teacher!"

"Heo? Mine are natural, so don't put me in the same category."

Heo obeyed. She did not entirely understand, but apparently people were proud of that after getting older. *So I need to do my best,* she told herself.

Meanwhile, Diana was still holding her chest while embracing her from behind.

"Now, you need to massage them a lot. That loosens up the skin and flesh, so it can more efficiently grow underneath. In other

words, it helps your breasts to get bigger."

"Really?"

"Have I ever lied to you?"

"Maybe not lied, but you do have a habit of making oddly persuasive arguments like this."

Diana responded by resting her smiling chin on Heo's left shoulder and nodding.

She removed her left hand from Heo's chest and held something in front of the girl.

"Is this a UCAT cellphone?"

"Yes. I thought this might happen, so I had it waterproofed. Now, Heo, this is necessary for you to recover your energy and that is necessary for UCAT as a whole. We are the only ones here, so listen to what I have to say."

Diana's voice reverberated through the bath.

"Confess to the Harakawa boy (Point Allocation: Your Life Plan)."

●

Harakawa was cutting wood for a festival stand on the school roof.

He was operating the jigsaw while holding the lumber on the block with a foot.

Sawdust scattered like spraying water, but he did not care since he wore sunglasses and used his bandanna in place of a mask.

After cutting the fourth piece, he looked around.

He stopped the jigsaw and heard hammering.

The rooftop was the closest work area for anything they could not bring into the classroom.

He also saw people from several other classes crouching or standing as they worked.

To make sure they did not have to use Ooki's idea of a rest area for people to sleep in, his class had come up with a mobile ethnic café called the Angry Locals. They had managed to reuse the frame from their spring festival stand, so they had not needed to use Sayama's place.

…It's still a pain either way.

If he stayed at UCAT, everyone would annoy him about what had happened in the morning, but he would have nothing to do at home.

His mother would complain if he visited her in the hospital without bringing Heo and his job at Yokota did not start until the evening.

Feeling he had no choice, he had gone to school.

He wondered what Heo was doing back at UCAT.

…I doubt the others will leave her alone.

The night before, she had said quite a lot after seeing that photograph of her great-grandfather. It had been like she thought talking was actively bringing her closer to the past.

But that isn't how it works, thought Harakawa.

He had not told Heo about his father. When they had visited his grave a month before, he had simply said the man died during the Great Kansai Earthquake.

Thinking back, his grandfather had belonged to the American military, so he may have been part of UCAT too.

Sayama had said to search for their pasts if they wanted to know why Team Leviathan was disbanding, but Harakawa did not understand why that was necessary. Heo seemed to think it was worth looking into, but Harakawa did not like taking action without knowing why.

That was why he did not want to actively pursue the past.

…But what is this about?

A thought had occurred to him before the battle with Yonkichi.

He muttered to himself with the jigsaw hiding his voice.

"If we can still fight, disbanding or not makes no difference. …So why are we so hung up over the name 'Team Leviathan'? And why did the treasurer protest?"

Even as he cut the lumber, he could not find the answer to his question.

…If I look into the past, will I find the answer?

"Will I find why we are Team Leviathan?"

He finished cutting the lumber. It fell in two pieces and he stopped the jigsaw.

…What does it all mean?

He muttered in his heart as he picked up the wood and his eyes met those of a girl painting a panel red.

"Harakawa-kun. You look like a hero in a battle between schools."

He was holding pieces of lumber while wearing sunglasses and a

bandanna mask.

"Then I'll use this as my costume for the year-end festival in winter."

"This school sure has a lot of festivals. Doesn't the year-end festival begin on the twenty-first immediately after the closing ceremony?"

"Those in the dorms – especially the third years – tend not to be around during the third term. The year-end festival was supposedly started for the third years to have some fun for the last time, but at some point the first and second years joined in."

"Well, we can prepare for it while the exams are being returned, so the timing works out. Speaking of the third years, what are that famous president and aggressive treasurer planning to do? You're on the student council along with Sayama-kun, right?"

That reminded Harakawa of something. First, he had become the vice-president's aide at some point. And second…

…That really depends on the president's injuries and whether the treasurer can recover or not.

He activated the jigsaw and pressed it against a piece of lumber sitting on a chair.

"I haven't heard anything. That's a problem those two will settle on their own."

"Oh? Quite the cool hero, aren't you? …Now for a hotter topic of discussion. Since you're living with your girlfriend, are you going to bring her to the school festival or the year-end festival?"

He pushed the jigsaw too hard and sliced straight through the chair along with the lumber.

The seat split in two, the metal legs clattered to the ground, and everyone's focus turned to him.

"Wow," said the classmate in surprise. "That sure got a reaction. I need to tell everyone the rumors are true."

"Wait. Don't go around spreading crazy rumors."

"But you make food for her every day and she's sleeping over at your place, right?"

He lifted the stopped jigsaw, removed his mask, and brushed up his disheveled hair.

"Listen. Heo is still a kid. She's a long way off from my tastes."

"Wow. Just Heo? No honorifics or anything? And you're

underestimating girls, Harakawa-kun. We change day by day."

"Is that so? I'll remember that. Thank you very much, classmate who is more mature than me."

He reached for a new piece of lumber, but the cellphone in his pocket rang. Everyone looked at him and the classmate girl spoke.

"Go ahead. Your girlfriend is calling."

"It is not-…"

He checked the number, but it was not from Heo. Relieved, he answered.

"This is Harakawa."

"Oh, H-Harakawa? I-it's Heo."

What is going on? he wondered while clicking his tongue and running to the landing of the emergency staircase. He ignored his classmate's call of "good luck" behind him.

"What is this? Why are you calling from someone else's phone?"

"Eh? Oh, I'm in UCAT and…um…I borrowed my teacher's phone."

"I see. So what is it? Tell me what you want, Heo Thunderson. I am very busy."

He reached the emergency staircase, but he continued down because people were working there too.

Once he reached the second story landing where the student council often gathered, the working students vanished, so he leaned against the railing.

"What is it?"

"Oh, right. Um. You see? This is hard to say and I've been keeping it to myself before, but…uh…"

"Again, what is it?"

He heard her gulp and it was obvious she was trying to say something.

●

With Diana to her left, Mikage to her right, and the plant creatures all around, Heo sat motionless in the bath.

She could blame the heat of the bath for her racing pulse.

She could blame the heat of the bath for the warmth in her face.

She could blame the heat of the bath for the excitement in her heart.

…I-I am not nervous.

She gathered her resolve and began by saying “um”.

However…

“If you don’t need anything, I’m going to hang up. You’re trying to heal, right? Focus on that, Heo Thunderson.”

“No, um, this is part of my rehabilitation.”

“Talking with me is? Or are you trying to make some kind of decision?”

“Y-yes.” She nodded and made up her mind. “Um, Harakawa. I, uh…”

She had something she needed to say. As soon as she opened her mouth to say it, Diana leaned in excitedly and her breasts pressed against Heo’s left back and shoulder. The sensation brought a new idea to Heo’s mind and it escaped her mouth.

“Do you like breasts!?”

●

Harakawa frowned at what Heo asked over the cellphone.

Alone on the emergency exit landing, he removed the phone from his ear and tilted his head while staring at it.

…Did her injuries from the battle this morning make her go insane?

No, wait, he thought. *Not even Heo would ask that so openly if she meant it sexually. She’s shy about things like that. For some reason, she’s been blessed with the luck to end up naked quite a lot, but she doesn’t want that kind of thing herself.*

There was a reason he had so readily suspected her of asking something like that.

…I’ve been surrounded by so many openly stupid people of late.

Heo was not like Izumo, Sayama, Hiba, or the others. She had a habit of jumping to the wrong conclusion or overthinking things, but Harakawa knew she was generally a smart girl.

He had also been rejecting her a little lately. That day in particular, he had left for school without waiting for her to wake from her treatment. He decided it would be wrong to simply doubt her.

“Okay, let’s settle this problem, Heo Thunderson. Think carefully. …What exactly do you mean?”

“I-I mean exactly what I said. Um… Do you like…breasts?”

…Exactly what she said? So I'm supposed to take it literally?

Has she gone insane or been infected by the Team Leviathan disease? he wondered while holding the phone up in the sky for fear of being infected himself.

…But wait.

He frowned and groaned a little as a certain memory came back to him.

…I asked her to make fried chicken for dinner.

This was Heo, so she was probably taking Sayama seriously and using UCAT's facilities to investigate her past. She needed to adapt to her surroundings, so she may have decided to make dinner for the others as well.

That dinner would be fried chicken.

In that context, breasts would indeed be my preference, he thought while nodding and bringing the phone back to his ear.

"Heo, Heo Thunderson. Listen carefully."

"What is it?"

"Well." He nodded. "You're talking about tonight, right?"

"Eh? Th-the night? …Yes, I suppose it would happen at night. You could say that. It's definitely too soon to start during the daytime."

"I see."

He nodded again. Some of what she was saying sounded strange, but that was likely an after effect of her injuries. At any rate, it seemed she really was talking about the fried chicken for dinner.

Also, he often heard about people having to cook as part of their rehabilitation. Experiencing a familiar flavor could bring back one's memories or senses.

"Um, Harakawa?" she asked.

"Yes, I'm fine, Heo Thunderson. Sorry, I was lost in thought for a bit there. …And yes, breasts are the way to go. Thighs are a close second," he said. "But breasts are definitely the best."

●

The three girls leaned forward in the bath for no real reason and they exchanged a glance.

"The Harakawa boy is surprisingly open with his sexuality."

"Ryuuji-kun likes them too, so do all guys like big breasts?"

"Heh heh. Mikage, that is normal from a biological standpoint. A

preference for small breasts goes against one's biology."

"T-teacher, I have a feeling it isn't that cut-and-dried an issue."

"…? Heo, is someone there with you?" asked Harakawa.

"Eh? No, there isn't."

She pressed the phone against her ear.

"A-anyway, Harakawa. About breasts… How much do you think is enough?"

"Good question. …Two is usually good for me."

"Y-yes, two would be good. That *is* the standard number. B-but what about size?"

"Most anyone would be happy if they're big enough to grab in both hands and take a big bite."

Diana tilted her head.

"Take a big bite? The Harakwa boy certainly is crude. …And he doesn't seem to understand this isn't an issue of 'most anyone'! We're talking about Heo's breasts, so his opinion is what-…"

"T-teacher, calm down and please don't get so excited about my breasts. Also, I think he's only being so crude because the battle this morning messed with his brain."

"Right. Ryuuji-kun is sometimes like that every morning."

"I see. Heo, then you say something to make up for what he lacks."

"Okay." Heo motivated herself. "U-um, Harakawa. When you 'take a bite', uh…"

"But even if I say 'big', more than three hundred grams is probably too much," he said.

"That's awfully specific."

"Now, Heo, do you know how to prepare them?"

She almost asked what he meant by "prepare", but she recalled what Diana had said about her breasts growing and how to prepare them for that.

"By massaging them?"

"I can help you if you want, but it would best if you did it yourself. Do you know what to put on them?"

"U-um… I'm not really sure about that."

"It doesn't have to be too specific, but remember this. …Start by drizzling some lemon juice on them."

"A-a liquid!? Does that give vitamins for the skin!? Does it help

the collagen!?”

“It’s necessary, so don’t make fun. …Now, for the next step, you’ll need salt, pepper, and a little bit of sugar.”

“Y-you need salt and pepper to massage them!? And sugar too!?”

“Yes, if you rub that into them at the start, they’ll be a lot more flavorful when you bite into them.”

Heo pictured it in her head and started to feel dizzy.

…So this is the world of adults.

Mother, father, great-grandfather, I just took three steps at once up the stairway of adulthood.

She almost collapsed, but Diana and Mikage supported her.

“Heo, Heo. Stick with it. Just a little further.”

“That’s right. If you put in the effort here, I’m sure it will make Harakawa happy.”

“O-okay. I’ll do my best.”

The plant creatures sticking their heads out from the water absorbed her excess heat and expelled oxygen. The bath turned into a jacuzzi, but the creatures seemed unable to keep up because they appeared troubled as they looked back and forth.

“Lots and lots! But…too much?”

Confident that everyone was supporting her, Heo took a breath, adjusted her grip on the phone, pressed it to her ear, and spoke as if it was a challenge to be overcome.

“H-Harakawa? In other words, I massage the flesh with the salt and pepper?”

“Right. And once you’ve rubbed that in, you add a beaten egg and massage it in as well.”

“A-an egg!?”

“That’s right.”

She felt something below her nose.

The towel Diana had been wearing pressed against her nose.

“Don’t worry, Heo. Not far now.”

“Anyway,” said Harakawa. “The rest is the same as normal. My mother actually uses some herbs as well, but you have to get the details just right with those and I don’t really remember the specifics. Maybe I’ll ask her sometime.”

“O-okay. I-if this massage technique comes directly from your mother, I’m sure it will be enough to satisfy you. I’ll do my best.”

"I'm not sure why you're putting so much effort into this, Heo Thunderson, but don't get too worked up, okay?"

He suddenly asked about something else entirely.

"Heo… Are you planning to investigate the past?"

"Eh?"

She looked up, exchanged a glance with a plant creature that raised its head, and tilted her head along with it.

"Why are you asking? Last night, it seemed like you didn't want to be a part of that."

"I would rather not if I don't have to. I'd probably end up saying something that threw cold water on your fun."

"No! P-please be a part of it!"

The words seemed to flow out of her gut.

"I don't want anyone but you to help! I'd be happy with whatever you might say, so you can say whatever you want. I might cry if it's too harsh, but…but I know you'll support me, so…"

"Sometimes I have to translate what you say to make it understandable, Heo Thunderson. Anyway…"

She heard him sigh before continuing.

"I'll be there at around five. Have dinner ready and your wounds healed by then, Heo Thunderson. There's something that's been bothering me."

"What is that?"

"It's a ridiculous question about what exactly Team Leviathan is."

He hung up there.

She thought about his last words as she listened to the dial tone.

…He's been thinking about the same thing.

She nodded in her heart, but another question came to her.

…Wh-when should I massage my chest?

Should she do it on her own or ask for his help once he arrived?

Those two options quickly sank deep within her.

"…"

"Ah, Heo!? Are you okay, Heo?"

She did not have the energy or wherewithal to answer, so she simply passed out and sank into the bubbling water.

●

After hanging up, Harakawa sighed and leaned back against the

landing's railing.

"Well, at least you have plenty of energy, Heo Thunderson."

She had said no one else was with her, but that was a blatant lie since she had borrowed the German inspector's phone.

He was having a lively day as well, so he had no complaint about that.

He glanced over at the wall covered in the sand that blew up from the schoolyard.

"…?"

Suddenly, the light hit the wall just right and he thought he saw writing.

…What?

This would be the work of the people who came here often, so it had to have been Sayama's group. However, he had eaten lunch with them here a few times, but he did not remember anyone mentioning the wall.

In that case, who had written in the sand on the wall and then hidden it?

…Was it Sayama?

With that thought, he tried to see if there really was writing there at all, but…

"Oh, Harakawa-san!"

The emergency exit opened and two people stepped out. One was Hiba with a bandage on his cheek and the other was…

"The art club president?"

"That's right."

The usual cat was missing, but she had the bird on her head and she gestured him over.

"Come with me. I have something to discuss. We need to come up with a way of defeating those four brothers."

Chapter 15

“A Place with a Voice”

You can make it, you can make it, you can make it
What do you call the idea
That you can make it because you have broken

●

A dark space had a stepped floor and thick bookcases.

It was the Kinugasa Library.

The library was filled with students. They were checking out reference material to help prepare for the school festival. Most of them were using encyclopedias, dictionaries, or maps, but a lot were checking out novels while they were at it.

The crowd was centered on the bookcases and people who had just arrived or were checking out moved between them.

The tables were being used by people using materials that could not be checked out or…

"People who are chatting. Heh heh. Doing something other than festival preparations is its own kind of joy."

Brunhild spoke at the lowest point at the center of the stepped floor.

Sitting across from her were Hiba in a track suit and…

"Harakawa? Why are you carrying a chainsaw?"

"Because you dragged me here before I could put it down, art club president. Plus, it's a jigsaw, not a chainsaw."

Harakawa placed the jigsaw on its side on the table.

"I'll be blunt. I'm not interested in this."

He crossed his arms.

"We lost once already. We were injured and injured him. I never had much of an obligation to the Leviathan Road, so I'd like to withdraw from this one."

"For the sake of that dragon girl?"

"For my own sake. I'm supporting my own livelihood, so my own safety is the most important thing for me to keep living."

"Fine, we can leave it at that. …And stay here, Harakawa. If you're supporting your livelihood, it means you're only here cutting lumber because you have nothing better to do. So how about you put that time to better use?"

Brunhild waved her left hand and placed it on the table.

They were surrounded by the sounds of footsteps, rustling school uniforms, and flipping pages. There were a lot of sounds, but they were all quiet and Brunhild's finger tapping on a book joined them.

"This is one of the books on legends that Professor Kinugasa put

together. There are a lot of dragons in 7th-Gear's Chinese mythology, but not many stories include four dragons. I found it almost right away, but those four brothers are…"

"The four dragon brothers that protect the four cardinal directions in Chinese mythology?"

"Stealing my line is a serious crime, Hiba Ryuuji. Go buy me some coffee later."

The bird on her head chirped and she nodded.

"And some bird food."

"Th-that's your duty, Schild-san!"

"Stop fighting it, criminal. And be quiet in the library. …But even if what you did was wrong, what you said was not. Chao may have created those four brothers as an homage to the four dragons. … And now they are our enemy."

"Your enemy maybe," said Harakawa. "But not mine."

"Who was it that tore off Yonkichi's arm? If it wasn't you, then go tell Heo Thunderson that she was the one to tear off his left arm since it apparently wasn't your doing."

After that, Brunhild looked down a little and expressionlessly opened the book.

"But this does not give much information. It only shows the patterns of the four dragons' names. One of those gives their names as Goukou, Goujun, Goumei, and Goukitsu in Japanese. The 'gou' refers to a long period of time. However, if you remove that because so much time has yet to pass and you replace it with a number indicating the order of creation, you get their names."

"What good does that do? Are you going to tell their fortune using their names?"

"Knowing your opponent's identity is the best way of understanding them and no longer fearing them. Even a terrorist becomes nothing more than a target to be attacked once you know their name, right?"

Harakawa raised his eyebrows a little, but Brunhild ignored him and lightly tapped the opened book again.

"It seems none of them have attacked Shinjou. Izumo and Kazami were defeated by the eldest and third brother while we dealt with the youngest, so maybe the second brother went to Sayama."

"In that case, I wouldn't want to be Sayama-san right now."

“I wouldn’t want to be him ever. And we should celebrate this. His presence means we only have to deal with three of them.”

“I am not dealing with any of them,” said Harakawa.

Brunhild looked up and smiled.

“Who ever said you would be? Don’t be stupid. I only told you to stay there. If you don’t want to look too pathetic, second year, then just sit there quietly.”

Harakawa clicked his tongue and rested his feet on the table.

Brunhild frowned.

“Are you trying to point the soles of your shoes at me?”

“You aren’t going to scold me for putting my feet on the table?”

“I do that in my dorm room…and I make sure to point the soles toward the world outside the window. I’m on an entirely different level from you.”

“Oh, how moving. …Now, tell me this, art club president. Do you have a chance of winning?”

He asked in a challenging tone, but Brunhild calmly answered.

“We do.”

●

Harakawa watched and listened.

The girl in front of him was expressionlessly speaking about the coming battle.

“We have a way to fight, but you all are the ones who will do the fighting. They aren’t even thinking about me. So let me tell you one thing: first and foremost, you had better make up for my injury.”

“Your honesty is refreshing. So what’s next?”

Brunhild nodded.

“They have a number of concept weapons and fixed concepts, which are concepts they can activate in the space around them. You remember that, don’t you? We don’t know what Nijun’s is, but we don’t need to worry about it since Sayama will handle him.”

“L-let’s worry about it a little, Schild-san.”

“Then go follow Sayama into the Okutama mountains. Unfortunately, this world only rewards concern if you show it in your actions.”

At that point, a tall old man in a vest walked over while carrying a stack of returned books.

“Nein, do not forget the many people that are concerned for you.”

“I haven’t, Siegfried. I have simply decided not to worry about Team Leviathan. Even if you do, they will do what they are going to do without even noticing. …That’s why giving them a nice kick in the rear when they fail is more effective than worrying.”

Harakawa saw the librarian’s shoulders shaking in bitter laughter.

“Do you know what that ‘nice kick in the rear’ is usually called, Nein?”

“If you say it’s ‘cheering them on’, I’ll grab your arm and claim you abused me. After all, saying that is akin to mental abuse. Now, a proper answer would be to call it instigating them.”

Brunhild turned a sulky look toward Harakawa.

“You don’t actually know why Sayama had Team Leviathan temporarily disband, do you? But I have a hunch. Kazami and Izumo should realize it before long too.”

“Kazami-san will find out why? …And she’ll return to the fight?”

“The silly girl was crying, wasn’t she? That’s her punishment for getting carried away. But punishments always have an end. If she wants to fight when that time comes, she will come to understand what Sayama meant,” said Brunhild. “And to prepare for that, we need to gather information on those four brothers and work out as much of a battle plan as we can.”

“Then show us your strategy, art club president.”

We’re finally getting to the main point, thought Harakawa.

“The fixed concept that took out Heo and me was ‘the world is reversed for an instant’. It most likely takes all attacks, direct or projectile, and returns them to the attacker by swapping positions. Plus, the switch only lasts an instant. Even if you try to attack yourself…”

“If Yonkichi does not use his fixed concept, you will hit yourself, right?”

Brunhild looked up at Siegfried.

“How long are you going to stand there watching us?”

“Until my legs start moving.”

“That side of you is exactly like my sister.”

She looked annoyed and shrugged.

“Listen,” she said to Hiba and Harakawa. “Imagine that reversing

concept is in effect now.”

“Eh? S-so if I grope my own chest, I would be groping your- I’m sorry! I won’t say any more! And please don’t give me that pitying look, Siegfried-san! Do not change the channel.”

“No, Hiba boy. I was not giving you a pitying look. I was realizing how much like your grandfather you are.”

“Th-that’s the same thing. And how are we anything alike!?”

Everyone ignored him.

Brunhild turned to Harakawa and he looked straight back.

“What if I punched you?”

“The fixed concept would make you punch yourself.”

“And if I punched myself?”

“I would immediately remove the fixed concept and you would punch yourself.”

He just about said there was no winning, but she swung her right hand.

A piece of paper flew through the air. It contained a word meaning ‘sever’. And…

“There are two of them: one for my neck and one for yours. … What about this?”

Brunhild saw Harakawa’s eyebrows rise and Hiba gulp.

“If I activate both papers at once, I can sever your head whether you swap our positions or not. There is no escape.”

“Wait, wait. Are you planning to commit sui-…”

Before he could add “cide”, he wrinkled his brow and said something else.

“Thunder Fellow or Susamikado wouldn’t be decapitated by that.”

“Right. Yonkichi lost his arm when Thunder Fellow charged in because the mechanical dragon is tougher than him. You just need to hit him and yourself with an attack you can survive but he can’t. Got it? Our enemy is not invincible. And just as we found where his name comes from,” she said. “There are likely other methods as well. And methods for the other brothers. Also, you all need to reach the same place as Kazami. You need to be asking why Team Leviathan needs to disband when you were working so well together.”

Harakawa and Hiba remained silent.

However, Hiba crossed his arms like Harakawa was doing and

finally formed a bitter smile.

"This is kind of strange. Team Leviathan has disbanded, yet here we are discussing how to fight for the Leviathan Road."

"Oh? But it's because you have disbanded that you can include an inspector like me in your discussion about fighting another Gear."

"That's just the official reasoning. In a way, you're more suited for Team Leviathan than us, Schild-san."

"Now that's just cruel. It sounds like you're bragging about being chosen."

"We weren't chosen."

"Then let me put it this way: you managed to reach that position. Meanwhile, I can only call out to you from the opposite shore. Sayama has gone on ahead while Kazami has fallen behind because she is so busy shouting and crying that you all need to go together. However, those of you that have fallen behind still don't understand what that means. You don't understand the meaning behind Team Leviathan's existence."

"The meaning behind its existence? You mean it isn't to complete the Leviathan Road?"

"Exactly. But…"

She paused and leaned forward a little.

"You have been doing well, but all that fell apart just because you were ordered to disband. You have great strength, but you lost. Why do you think that is? …What does Team Leviathan need to do well no matter what happens?"

"Well…"

"You don't know, do you? Silent second year, you're not saying anything because you don't know, aren't you? On the other hand, Kazami fought back because she didn't want to know. …But that means she does know."

Brunhild took a breath, leaned back in her chair, and gave a self-deprecating smile.

"So watch Kazami. She's a possible scenario for your own future. If you watch her, you will either see her give up or continue on. And if you all will decide to continue on, then help put together a plan that lets Kazami go ahead as an example for you."

"You aren't going to fight, Schild-san?"

"Of course not. Fighting is pain in the butt and getting all of you

moving is exhausting enough. Now, let's put together what information we have on the other brothers."

She sat up in her chair and smiled, but a large hand was placed on her head.

It was the hand Siegfried was not using to hold the books.

"That is a good decision, Nein. But you told one lie."

He rubbed her hair and walked away as he finished speaking.

"Place your dominant hand on the table and show it to them. It's wrapped in a bandage, isn't it? That is more than enough reason not to fight. There is no need to hide it."

Her cheeks grew red and she tried to turn back toward him, but he had already removed his hand and left.

She groaned as she settled back in her seat and Hiba muttered a few words toward the floor.

"Everyone has someone they can never beat, don't they?"

A paper with the word "stab" written on it stabbed into Hiba's forehead.

●

The cloudy sky cleared out to the west and the sunlight broke through.

The light hit a broad, shallow slope filled with pale yellow.

The yellow was susuki grass.

Short susuki grass with drooping heads covered the entire area.

The susuki grass field was surrounded by forest and the trees kept out most of the wind.

The broad slope contained one color other than yellow.

It was the bluish black of a suit.

That suit was worn by Sayama as he parted the chest-high susuki grass.

"It should be somewhere around here."

Approximately twelve hours had passed since he had entered the mountains. With his rucksack on his back and a short machete in hand, he had reached a certain ridge.

His hair was a little disheveled and his shoes were dirty. He had worked up a sweat, so the cheeks of his slender face somewhat drooped.

However, his eyes were filled with strength.

…I am glaring.

He was aware of it.

"It is because I am starved for Shinjou-kun."

I need to bear with it, he told himself as he pulled a handheld digital recorder from his pocket.

"N-no, Sayama-kun! Not here!"

…Yes, even Shinjou-kun agrees.

"In other words, this is not the place. I must go elsewhere."

He looked around, but only forest surrounded the slope. He could see nothing else.

He did see the sun above the forest, but…

"It will set in another three hours. I must plan for the worst case and find a campsite before then."

He had already entered an area of the mountains he had never visited before. Unless he was returning the way he had come, moving at night would be too dangerous.

Even after traveling so far, he had not run across Nijun, but he was certain the man was pursuing him.

Just in case, a safe campsite would be best, he decided.

The mountain past the southwestern forest was Mount Kumotori. He could see the forest covering its peak and the path leading to it.

His current position had an altitude of around 1900 meters.

The sun hit the slope now because it was on the western side of the mountain, but the autumn's west wind would blow through once evening arrived. The sun warmed it now, but it would be better to circle to the eastern side to spend the night.

With a possible attack from Nijun, it would be best to choose a spot with a good view.

…In that case, I should choose somewhere near the top of the eastern slope.

Settling on that, he began to speak.

"Shinjou-kun."

He realized he naturally began by calling her name.

This is not good, he thought as he walked.

He climbed the susuki grass slope with a self-deprecating smile.

"When we are reunited, I will tell you the path my parents once took was a sunny autumn slope."

Would she be impressed? Would she be so moved that she began

to strip?

"No, that is only a delusion brought on by my Shinjou-kun withdrawal."

Calm down, he thought. *Just now, she told me to go elsewhere, so I must bear with it for now. I truly heard that voice. It was no illusion.*

So I need to stop conveniently imagining things, he added.

And it is a crime to make her conveniently lewd in my delusions, he told himself.

…But if that happens in person, it will show mutual understanding.

He nodded and stood on the ridge atop the slope. He placed his hands around his mouth and shouted to the other mountain.

"In person truly is best!"

"In person truly is best."

…Oh! Nature is showing its understanding. Viva the mountains!

Satisfied, he looked down the shadowy slope to find a spot perfect for a camp.

"…"

He found one. And it already had a house.

Only about three meters down, someone had dug deep into the slope.

That created a wide area of flat land. That thirty square meters used gravel to isolate itself from the susuki grass and an old tile roof rose up to just below Sayama's feet.

…Is this it?

The house below seemed to have three twelve-square-meter rooms and an earthen-walled storehouse to the north.

Several of the faded roof tiles were missing and the roof had a hole to the south.

The wooden walls had also baked in the sun and the shaded areas were covered with moss. All of the windows had fallen out, the back entrance's sliding door had come from its frame, and it lay weathered and broken on the ground.

How long had it been since the place began to rot?

"…"

Sayama pulled a photograph from his pocket. It was the photo of Professor Kinugasa's house that he had received from Moira 1st

below Izumo UCAT. He could not tell the house's shape from above, but he could check the positions of the surrounding mountains.

"This is it."

…Thank you, #8-kun.

He silently thanked the automaton who had calculated out the location.

He placed the document back in his pocket and breathed in.

"This… This is the same air that my parents once breathed."

That thought brought pain to the left side of his chest. He pressed his right hand against his chest, but even tensing his body could not oppose the distortion within his ribs. He could only frown.

"…"

He stood still for several seconds.

After three or four breaths, he let out a slow, trembling breath and clenched his left fist.

Strength gathered in his eyes and he turned them toward the house below.

He observed the old roof tiles, nodded, and prepared to say "How about I go?".

"Shinjou-kun."

But this time he did not reject calling that name. Instead, he rejected something else.

"No, this is not a question."

He changed his wording.

"I will go, Shinjou-kun. That way I can stand beside the one who desires the past so she can find her parents and who does not fear facing that loss. I will stand beside those who have accepted all that they have lost."

The wind blew from behind him. This was the west wind of autumn that told him the warmth of the sun would soon vanish.

…Did this wind wash over my parents as well?

He walked forward to circle around the slope and reach the house.

The wind seemed to push him from behind and the vanishing warmth of the sun seemed to support him.

"I will go. That way I can convince myself I am worthy of leading the others. Just as I asked Kazami and the others, I too must accept that I am suitable for Team Leviathan."

He walked.

“I too wish to overtake the past, Shinjou-kun.”

●

Darkness was falling over a city.

It was a sloped city.

Most of the people who lived there worked in the low seaside urban district during the day and returned to the mountainous residential district in the evening.

The people aboard the streetcars, busses, and trains went from wearing school uniforms to suits.

A set of eyes inside a certain building watched that flow of people through the city.

It was a small white building that looked more like a warehouse than a residence.

It contained a tall wooden room with two columns of long wooden benches.

Beyond the benches was a podium, showing that this was a church.

A girl faced the darkening city through one of the windows on the side wall.

She wore an orange jacket and had long black hair.

She was Shinjou.

She lowered her head toward the black phone and table set prepared by the church’s side wall.

In front of the window to the city, she held a pen and memo pad in her hands and the phone receiver between her head and left shoulder.

“I see. So you didn’t find anyone like that? …No, thank you very much. I know I was asking a lot. …Yes, thank them for me as well.”

She gave a small smile.

“Yes, that’s right. If I find my mother, reporting that would be the best thanks of all, wouldn’t it? …Yes, please do if you find anything. I will move on to the next place. Bye.”

She hung up.

She crossed out three of the church names she had copied onto the memo pad.

She sighed and took in another breath.

She faced the white wall and tall window.

The residential district was located at the top of the slope. Further down, she saw the lights of the shopping district and plenty of people walking on the sidewalks.

She looked away from the window and down to the black phone and documents.

The documents were covered in checks from the pen in her hand.

She had been calling churches and orphanages to see if they had any records of a Shinjou Yukio.

All of the checks were X-marks. A circle would mean success, but she had yet to draw one.

She was disappointed, but she had another thought while looking around.

…It feels so strange to be here.

This was a church.

It was a gathering place that doubled as a local volunteer office.

It was the closest one to the volunteer office at Sakai's port that she had managed to contact by phone.

An old woman had answered the phone and she had told Shinjou to visit when she had heard the situation.

Shinjou had started running and had arrived at this church after several minutes.

When she had knocked on the white door, an old woman dressed in black had answered the door and asked what she needed.

Shinjou had clearly answered as follows.

"I am looking for the church orphanage that held someone named Shinjou Yukio from the sixties to the seventies. Shinjou Yukio might be my mother, but I'm having trouble because the documents were lost in the earthquake. …Please help me. I have a list of the current orphanages and I thought a church might know which ones are church orphanages. I am not asking for anything more than that."

"How soon do you need this?"

"Before ten tonight. I need to leave by then."

"That is quite sudden. Why the rush?"

"A friend was…in an accident, so I need to go help."

"I see."

The woman had nodded and pulled a thick book of documents from the office.

It had not contained the name Shinjou Yukio.

The old woman had said she had transferred to this job after the earthquake and that she would help Shinjou while using it as a chance to greet the other churches.

“Please let me see your list. We can divide up the work. You use the phone in the sanctuary and contact the places you can reach that way. I will contact the places on the list I am familiar with and some acquaintances who are well-known in areas not represented on the list. I will get an answer from as many places as I can contact today.”

Shinjou had frowned at the resolve in the woman’s voice.

“Why are you going so far to help me?”

“What a silly question. If you could stay here longer, you would undoubtedly find the answer on your own. The only reason you cannot do that is because you need to go help your friend, so you have done nothing wrong. And not blessing someone who has done nothing wrong would be cruel indeed. Now, leave your list and go. This is a sloped city, so a lot of work awaits you once you find your destination and must run there.”

About five hours had passed since then.

They had split up the list and took hourly breaks for tea and reporting on their progress.

The old woman had accurately contacted orphanages by region while Shinjou went through the list page by page.

The woman was on the final region. She was likely in the back room calling someone with a connection to the city’s port.

Shinjou was steadily working on the list in her hand, but…

“…”

She had just finished checking the entire second-to-last page.

Every single one of them had been dead ends.

If the list on the final page did not turn up anything…

…What will I do?

She would have to rely on the old woman using the phone in the back room.

“I hope that doesn’t happen.”

She was drawing close to knowing if she could find her past or not.

She was certain that records of Shinjou Yukio existed, but she still

did not know if she would find them or not.

She remembered what she had felt at the port.

…The past is being overwritten by the present.

While wondering if that was true, she looked out the window in front of her.

The sloped city was dyed in the colors of the sunset and there was a gap in the center of the residential district.

That land on the slope received plenty of sun, but it was still empty.

Having walked past it on the way here, Shinjou knew what that gap was.

She had wondered what it was while running by, but she had seen a sign.

"An area of high risk for tertiary damages."

The earthquake itself caused the primary damage and the fires and such caused by that were the secondary damages. In the Great Kansai Earthquake's case, the tertiary damages were later collapses caused by land loosened by the earthquake.

That gap was the area where such collapses were likely. Normally, construction would be done to fix the land, but the administrative delays and fear of causing more damages had likely prevented that work from being done.

…So will that land stay like that forever if it doesn't collapse?

The land would not recover on its own.

It was a wound on the slope. Not only that, it was a wound that had yet to open but would eventually open.

Even after a decade, the scars of the earthquake remained.

"The past simply vanishes."

Shinjou looked up suddenly as she realized her mind was too externally focused.

This was no time to be engrossed in the city.

She knew she had to continue calling.

To do so, she adjusted her position in the chair and flipped to the next page.

"Let's see," she muttered while revealing that final page.

She looked at what was printed there.

"…Eh?"

That final page contained a list of addresses, but they were all

crossed out.

Those lines told her these entries were excluded.

●

She realized what the final page of addresses was.

…A list of the orphanages, churches, and volunteer offices that they know are no longer running.

She guessed that the municipal office had only included this page to be considerate. If she had only been given a list of contactable places, she might have searched for further places to contact.

…So this lets me know not to waste my time on places that are no longer running.

She had simply overlooked its inclusion.

She had flipped through the entire list a few times since receiving it, but she had not actually read through it all.

She had been afraid to check too carefully because she had feared it would give her an answer she did not want.

Oh, no, she thought. *Why?* she also thought.

"…"

She stood up from the chair for no real reason.

Several emotions and thoughts filled her mind.

The people outside the window were moving, but she did not see them.

All she saw were the few sheets of paper.

"Um…"

Panicking, she checked through them again.

However, everything but the final list was already checked.

She opened her bag and pulled out her change of clothes, a map, some valuables, her binder, and the envelope from Sayama.

"There's no more."

The words escaping her mouth meant two things.

First, there were no more pages to the list.

Second, there were no more places for her to check.

And those two facts led to only one conclusion.

…There's nothing more I can do?

It was so sudden.

She had thought there was plenty more she could do, so this felt like a sudden stop.

She was unsure how to react.

"Kh."

While wondering what to do, she loaded her things back in the cold bag.

She grabbed the change of clothes, the map, and then the binder and envelope.

The binder was black and the envelope white. Her eyes reflected those two colors which contained her thoughts and Sayama's will.

The contrasting color and the feelings held within brought her back to her senses.

That was when she first realized a certain fact: she was barely breathing.

"Ah."

When she finally released the air from her lungs, she felt like she was falling.

That was only an illusion. In reality, it was nothing more than her shoulders drooping and the bottom of her gut relaxing.

…I'm nervous.

She still wondered what to do and something else arrived to replace the tension in her lower abdomen.

It was pain. The pain she always felt at the end of the month quickly grew due to her stress.

She gently twisted her body and grabbed the table to put up with it.

Her lowered eyes fell to the list from the municipal office.

There was nothing more she could do with it, but…

"It isn't over yet."

To endure the pain, she inhaled as if crushing the dull pain in her gut.

"This church's manager is still making calls."

A moment later, the last door on the opposite wall opened and loud footsteps filled the room.

"How did it go? I just finished."

The old woman's voice seemed to drive the words "it's over" into her back.

Shinjou hesitated.

She wanted to ask what the woman had found and if she had found any records of Shinjou Yukio. After all…

…I didn't find anything!

So she turned around. She gathered the documents from the table, held them to her chest, and looked behind her.

The slender old woman stood there in her black dress. The fairly strong eyes below her gray hair looked straight back at her.

"How did it go, Shinjou-san?"

"U-um, well…"

She just about asked the woman how it had gone for her, but…

"I didn't find anything."

Her voice turned into a trembling sigh.

Oh, no, she thought. *Didn't I prepare for this again and again?*

Hadn't she mentally rehearsed for this possibility countless times?

She was only searching for someone who might not be her mother. She would eventually find an answer and she even had someone helping her find that answer today.

Nevertheless, she held the papers close, took in a breath, tried her best not to cry, and let words spill out in place of tears.

"I-I didn't find anything. …No matter where I checked, I couldn't find anything!"

"I see."

After letting out a trembling breath, she breathed in to replace it.

She coughed once, her entire body trembled, and she breathed in again.

"U-um…"

Sorry for making you see this, she thought.

"That is fine," said the woman. "This just shows how important this is to you."

Shinjou could not agree with or deny those words, so she chose to remain silent.

"I also could not find any records of a Shinjou Yukio."

Those sudden words caused all air to vanish from Shinjou's throat.

Eh? she thought, but only after another thought.

…What did she just say?

What did that mean? Had she not checked in the right way? Had she been lied to?

…No, that can't be!

I need to trust her, she thought.

She prepared her heart that had grown empty with surprise and she spoke quietly.

“Does that mean…Shinjou Yukio was not in Sakai?”

“I do not know that. However…”

The woman smiled.

“There was one blessing.”

“A blessing?”

“Yes,” she replied.

Shinjou did not know what she meant. She had been told there were no records of Shinjou Yukio and yet she had been told there was a blessing.

“Someone who used to run our diocese told me of a church orphanage that moved after the earthquake. However, it welcomed in a great number of people as it did so and gave up being a church. It became a normal orphanage.”

“You mean…!?”

Her heart instantly flared up like a fire.

A question burst from her like heat from the flames.

She reflexively took a strong step forward.

“Where is that orphanage!?”

“Here.”

The woman moved the counter to hold out a piece of paper with an address and orphanage name.

“Luckily, it’s just what you are looking for. It apparently has no phone, so get running. But learn its name first.”

The woman spoke from beyond the paper.

“It was known as the Holy Soukou Institution, but it is apparently known as the Soukou House now. It looks like a church at first glance and…”

She took a breath.

“I hear they often sing hymns there.”

Chapter 16

“Dry Desire”

To thirst for something
Is nothing other than the joy of dryness

●

Beyond the thin clouds, the sun was beginning to set.

At the bottom of a cleared slope in the mountains were a long runway and a white building.

Behind the building was a green space.

The area past the freight elevator could be called a vegetable garden, a flower bed, or a farm.

The separated space continued up onto the slope and it contained flowers, trees, and other plants. The words colorful and multi-purpose perfectly described it.

Four individuals stood near the plants growing in a vegetable garden.

Two had human forms and two were plant creatures walking alongside the other two.

One of the human forms was a short girl with a small animal on her head. She wore a blue armored uniform and an orange jacket.

The other was tall and wore an armored uniform with a long skirt.

The short one was holding the tall one's hand in one hand and a basket in the other.

The basket contained picked plants and herbs wrapped in rubber bands.

"Heo, are you using those for the massage as well?"

"No, these are for dinner tonight. Do you like fried chicken, Mikage?"

"Yes. I like the skinny ones."

Does she mean the legs? wondered Heo.

She then glanced down at the piece of paper inside the basket.

It had some notes written in English shorthand.

…I've asked about UCAT's blank period all around here.

After Diana had left for some kind of work, Heo had wandered around UCAT.

It was partially to familiarize herself with the facility and partially to take a walk with Mikage. On the way, she had spoken with people close to Team Leviathan or the people around those people.

…For example, I got some information from Development Department Director Tsukuyomi.

• Her husband died in the secondary damages of the Great Kansai Earthquake.

• For some reason, Nagata Tatsumi has a Cowling Sword made by her husband.

Even after being told that, Heo had said nothing about the Cowling Sword she had seen in her dream.

…Until Sayama makes a decision, it would be best not to take any careless actions.

That was her decision.

She had more notes based on the other people she had asked about UCAT's blank period.

• I'm interested, but I don't know anything about it since I joined after the blank period. → 28 people

• I assume some kind of unspeakable scandal happened. → 11 people.

• Maybe the Army knows something about it. → 3 people.

• I'm interested…in you, Heo-kun. → Turned him down.

• I assume some kind of unspeakable scandal happened…and I assume it was caused by UCAT Director Ooshiro. → I kind of agree.

• Oh, thanks for coming. Come on in and I'll give you some candy. Yes, yes. Just step inside for a little bit. → Contacted the authorities.

A lot of the information was probably useless, but she could decide which that was if she focused.

To sum it all up…

"Everyone is interested in the blank period."

"I wonder why," said Mikage. "It has nothing to do with the people here now."

Heo casually nodded, but a question came to her.

…The past shouldn't have anything to do with Team Leviathan either.

The team was limited to the present, so why did they need the past?

"That's a good question. Why is everyone so interested in a past that shouldn't have anything to do with them?"

She tilted her head, but no answer came to her.

They began to walk and the two plant creatures followed. They were helping to lower her fever from her exhaustion and injuries, but they were not expelling much air anymore

“Feeling good?” asked one.

She was almost fully healed.

…And so is Mikage.

Mikage was still not steady on her feet and she would occasionally come to a stop as they walked.

Whenever that happened, Heo would turn around to find her looking at some flowers or a face-shaped stone someone had laid out as a decoration.

…Is this what it would be like to have a little sister?

Heo thought that was a little rude as she walked with Mikage and the plant creatures.

This was not her first time to walk through this place, but it was her first time to use it for herself. Also, before Diana had left for some business in the city, she had said Heo could plant something here too.

What would she plant here?

Unable to find an answer, she asked Mikage.

“Mikage, what would you plant here if you could?”

“I would grow Ryuuji-kun. …He’s always saying he wishes he was taller or smarter. He’s especially insistent that we would be in equilibrium if he was taller.”

She looked to one corner of the slope.

“That would probably be a good spot.”

“P-please don’t get me involved in a crime. And I think burying a person is a bad idea for a number of reasons.”

Heo felt a tug on her hand and saw Mikage had stopped walking.

The girl looked to a narrow, deep hole to the right. Heo read the sign to the side of the hole.

“For Ooshiro only. (Keep your chin up)”

“Keep your chin up? So stay positive?”

“L-let’s not think too much about that. U-um, the next herb is…”

Heo looked forward and saw Diana’s flower bed.

“What did she plant?”

She looked down in interest and found a few plants with long leaves. The sign said “If you’re going to pull them up, use a dog”, but

Heo did her best to ignore it.

…That's just a joke. She's joking.

She stopped the plant creatures from trying to pull up the plants and she sighed.

Mikage patted her shoulder from the side.

"Heo, taking everything so seriously will only wear you out."

"Yes. I don't think I'm quite used to this place yet.

"Ryuuji-kun said letting it influence you feels good. He happily said he was soaking in it."

"Oh, I see."

Heo reached a strange understanding and straightened up to refresh her mood.

Suddenly, Mikage's hands reached to her sides from behind.

She gave a ticklish shriek and strength filled Mikage's hands.

"Heo, you're bending your back."

"Oh, thank you very much."

Mikage nodded but still seemed dissatisfied with Heo's posture because she corrected a slight bend.

While bending Heo to the left and right and back again, Mikage asked a question.

"Did you know your grandfather's father?"

"Eh? Oh. No, I didn't know my grandfather's fath-… I didn't know him all that well."

"I didn't know my mother very well either. Ryuuji-kun saw her in Baku's past, but I've only seen a photo. …Even so, I'm glad I saw the photo. She was smiling."

She paused for a moment.

"But seeing her move would have been even better. Ryuuji-kun told me about what he saw, though. He says she was beautiful and noble…and that her panties were white."

"D-do I lose if I question that? I do, don't I?"

"Heo, you can't rush this. You'll eventually be able to win."

What does that mean? wondered Heo with a calming sigh.

Mikage removed her hands from Heo's sides and placed them on her shoulders instead. She resumed moving her back and forth.

"Ryuuji-kun's grandmother said his grandfather was friends with your grandfather's father. She said they would always lend each other magazines of naked girls and she would hit them with a metal

bar."

"Is that so?'

"Yes, but you know that? Ryuuji-kun's grandparents won't say anything about his father. Did your grandfather's father ever till you about your parents?"

Heo gasped at that question.

She had been asked exactly what she wanted to know.

And so she answered.

"No."

She tried to say "but I want to look into it", but Mikage spoke before she could.

"I want to look into it."

Heo reflexively turned toward Mikage.

Mikage stopped speaking with her arms slightly raised. She looked at Heo with a frown.

"Do you want to as well?"

Heo realized she had tensed up and that she was giving a flustered expression. *I can't do that,* she scolded herself. *All she did was say what I wanted to say.*

…I'm acting like those words belong to me.

She was certain Mikage had to have been thinking the same thing for some time.

"Sorry, Heo. Did I steal your words?"

"No, it's fine. Whoever says it first gets to say it."

She frantically shook her hands back and forth. She tried to smile brightly, but Mikage gave an even better smile.

"But Baku controls the past and he chose you, not the person who said it first. Just like American UCAT began pursuing you first, but it was Harakawa who got you. And…sorry, Heo. I might know about your father."

"Eh?"

"Yes. I've been sleeping somewhere in UCAT for a long time. From about sixty years ago to about ten years ago. I only woke up on the night of the Great Kansai Earthquake."

"…"

"Ryuuji-kun's father took me and left me with Ryuuji-kun. He told him to look after me but 'if you're a man, don't do anything sexual to her until she grows up'."

“Sounds like his father was a lot like him.”

“Yes. But I was asleep, so I don’t actually remember it. Also…”

“Also?”

“Miki is in the Army. Ryuuji-kun’s father apparently found her at the earthquake site before he died. She was with us when I woke up.”

It took Heo several seconds to realize who Miki was.

Once she did, she gulped.

“You mean Nagata Tatsumi, don’t you? I heard she is an important member of the Army. …So you used to know her?”

“Yes, but it makes me wonder. She might have had some connection to Ryuuji-kun’s parents. This might be a coincidence, but…”

Mikage looked Heo in the eye.

“Nagata is Ryuuji-kun’s mother’s maiden name.”

“Eh?”

“I think it’s just a coincidence,” said Mikage before falling silent.

However, there was likely more to what she had said.

What would it mean if there was a connection? To find out…

…We need to look to the past.

They were learning more about their grandparents and Heo’s great-grandfather. Sayama’s investigation may have had him following his parents’ footsteps, but the house belonged to a leader of his grandfather’s generation.

On the other hand, they had almost no information on their parents’ generation.

…What happened then?

She knew the Great Kansai Earthquake had happened, but the past she had seen that morning had shown a battle in an empty Osaka that was likely a concept space.

The adults who would know what had happened – including Diana – were refusing to speak.

…Why?

Why were they so tightlipped about that battle?

She thought they would talk about it if they had not done anything wrong, but she did not want to think Diana and the others had done something wrong.

…Which is it?

She wanted to know.

Knowing could put her parents, Diana, and the others in the wrong, but she still wanted to know.

"You want to know, don't you?"

Heo spoke aloud as if asking herself.

"That way you can face what happened without avoiding the truth."

She reached for Baku on her head, hoping he would show her the past.

However, he parted her hair and sank down as if hiding.

His little paws reached below her hair and tickled her scalp.

"Uhya hya!!"

Her shoulders stiffened and she frantically swallowed her shout.

That was when a small form stood from beyond the rice growing to her left.

It was an old woman in white. It seemed she had been looking after the flowers on the other side.

She turned toward the building in preparation to return and she gave a quick bow toward Heo and Mikage.

What a beautiful person, thought Heo. She was aged, but her expression was perfectly clear and void of needless strength. That fact delayed Heo's realization that the woman had dark middle eastern skin.

Heo frantically bowed back.

"H-hello."

The woman's expression froze when she heard that. A hint of tension and surprise could be seen on her face.

"Maria?"

That female name put that same expression on Heo's face.

The plant creature at her feet expelled gas as if converting her emotion.

However, the old woman gave a bitter smile of sudden realization.

"Sorry. Your voice reminded me of someone I used to know."

Heo was about to say she did not mind, but she found herself saying something else.

"You knew my mother, didn't you?"

“Your mother?”

“Yes…I mean, testament. My mother’s name was Maria Thunderson, my father was James Thunderson, and I am their daughter, Heo Thunderson.”

The old woman responded by circling the rice plants and approaching. She repeated an “oh” sound of surprise and joy again and again and she finally reached a hand out toward Heo.

“Their daughter is-…”

She tried to touch Heo.

But there was sudden motion behind Heo.

Mikage quickly moved in front of her.

She took a forceful step forward to move the old woman away.

Heo watched and listened as the other girl spoke clearly in front of her.

“No. And sorry. But Heo named herself and I will name myself. … I am Hiba Mikage. According to Ryuuji-kun, I am the best in his eyes.”

“U-um, Mikage? I don’t think you need to be so cautious about her.”

“I do. You do not know this place as well as I do and Harakawa would be unhappy if something happened to you. So I will protect you. …Like I wasn’t able to this morning.”

Strength filled Mikage’s back with those last words.

Seeing the girl acting to protect her, Heo realized she had been wrong earlier.

…How could I think of her like a little sister?

Mikage had much more resolve. Heo placed her hands around the hand hanging by Mikage’s side. She then faced the old woman.

“Um, sorry, but you heard her.”

“Yes. And, Heo. I need to protect you because your chest has yet to evolve.”

“W-was that comment really necessary?”

The old woman laughed.

“Ho ho. Such good friends. But this is simply amazing. To think I would meet a Thunderson child and a member of the Hiba family. Not to mention hearing the name Harakawa after so long.”

Still smiling, she bowed.

“I am not a member of UCAT. I am simply borrowing a place to live here. Ho ho. I am Arnavaz Mesam. Field Operations Director Abram Mesam is my husband and my Fereydun.”

“Ah,” said Heo in slight surprise.

She knew of the field operations director. He would sometimes show up during training. He was a large man who had looked dangerous to Heo.

…But he’s married to someone like this.

What a rude thing to think, she scolded herself. To change her train of thought, she asked about one thing Arnavaz had said.

"Arnava- Lady Arnavaz? Um, what do you mean by Fereydun?"

"It means hero. Abram was a hero in our country. He travelled the path of medicine, saved people, and…yes, he is my Fereydun."

Heo realized something while looking the old woman directly in the eye.

She realized why the woman had mistaken her for her mother.

The woman was blind.

And as soon as she noticed that, something moved atop her head.

It was Baku.

He raised his front legs as if greeting Arnavaz.

●

Mikage stood on parched land.

…?

She had been in a vegetable garden and the sky had been cloudy, but she was now on a vast stretch of parched land and the sky was a clear blue as far as the eye could see.

She looked around and saw a few people wearing different colors of cloth.

Beyond them was a large structure with a square roof and dry color.

The wall around the structure had crumbled in places.

The trees inside the wall had few leaves and not much grew in the large yard visible through the entrance.

The building itself had partially crumbled.

There were quite a few cracks in the sun-covered southern wall.

There did not seem to be anyone inside.

The people standing in front of the withered and dying building were all women.

They wore blue, brown, or yellow cloth that covered everything but their faces.

They stood motionless below the sun which was almost directly overhead.

All they did was stare out into the dry field.

They seemed to be waiting for something to arrive.

What are they waiting for? wondered Mikage as she looked

behind her.

That was when she realized she only existed as her senses of sight and vision.

…Oh.

Baku was showing her the past.

She looked down at her hands but found nothing. She only had a faint sense of their existence, much like when inside Susamikado.

Behind her, she found sand dunes.

It was an ocean of sand covered in dry hills.

After observing the scenery, she turned her vision back around.

"…?"

She realized she stood in a position lower than the dunes or the building.

She looked at her feet and found cracks running through the parched ground.

…Was there water here?

She did not fully understand, but she grasped that the building was so dry because the water that should have been here was not.

Without water, one grew thirsty, so she wondered if the people were trying to move elsewhere.

…It must be tough.

With that thought, she approached the women.

She tried to walk and her vision moved.

Interestingly enough, she moved faster than her legs normally carried her.

"If only I could always move like this."

While moving at an ideal pace and speed, she looked to the people standing before the building.

She realized her previous prediction had been correct.

The people had gathered clothing and other luggage at their feet so they could move out.

However, one of them had no luggage at her feet.

The woman standing in the center wore white, hid her face with a hood, and simply clasped her hands in front of her waist.

An older woman in red spoke from her right.

Mikage could not understand the words, but their meaning reached her.

"Lady Arnavaz, you won't be coming with us?"

Arnavaz? wondered Mikage with a mental tilt of the head. *This woman completely hidden by white cloth is Arnavaz?*

"…"

She peered into the hood, but she could only see the woman's nose and mouth.

She has a beautiful face, she thought.

The woman in red closed her eyes a little while facing Arnavaz.

"I sent a message about today's closing of the Sahan house, but there was no response. That man learned medicine at the city's university as the prince of the Mesam family and he is called a hero for the people he has saved, but he has abandoned you for fifteen years since promising to marry you."

The woman took a breath and faced the dry and empty building behind her.

"And I had hoped he would save the Sahan family."

"This is fine, Shahina."

Mikage heard Arnavaz's voice and saw the white hood shake slightly.

"The people of the desert are the people of the sand. We live like the scorching heat of day and we die like the calm chill of night. This just means Sahan has reached the night. He is known as a hero, so telling him to marry the blind princess of a house nearing the night must sound like telling him to lose his light and go to sleep."

She spoke quietly.

"The marriage proposal was made by my late father and he merely accepted. It would be wrong to expect anything of-…"

"Come with us, Lady Arnavaz."

Arnavaz was cut off by Shahina, the woman in red.

"We cannot live as we have, but we should be able to rely on your connections as head of the family. That man, Abram, has apparently cast aside his position as heir to the Mesam family, so an engagement from fifteen years ago is no longer valid."

"Are you asking me to use convenient words to throw out my honor as a bride?"

"Clinging to that honor will not bring him here! You even gave us all of your belongings as a severance payment, so…"

"A blind woman does not need colorful clothing. I have been so spoiled that I do not know how to cook, so I do not need the

furniture either. And I cannot live alone, so I do not even need money."

Arnavaz raised both hands.

The cloth fell back to reveal her white hands which held something.

Mikage circled in front of her to see what she held in each hand.

Her left hand held a faded letter on the verge of falling apart.

And the right held…

"Your family's sword? Lady Arnavaz!?"

"When this letter from him arrived fifteen years ago, time stopped for me. My brothers died in war to the west, so I inherited this blade upon my father's death two years ago. Now, it is the key to restarting my time."

She looked up and Mikage saw her face.

…*Such a beautiful face.*

But a scary one, she thought.

In this dream, Arnavaz was still young, but her expression had a slight downward bend and a hint of shaking tension.

…*You need to take it easy.*

However, the words would not reach the past even if she spoke them aloud.

Arnavaz spoke with her unseeing eyes turned toward the sky.

"A contract in the left hand and a blade in the right. God will surely inspire the daughter of Sahan with a song. Inspire her to advance through Sahan's night and face the morning."

She lowered her head and hid the short sword and letter inside her clothes.

"I was a weak child and everyone thought I would be the first to die, yet I have outlived them all. I can do nothing, so why did I outlive my brothers who went to school and found their own places in the world? If there is a reason, it would have to be for this blade."

"Lady Arnavaz."

"Now, go. You have left this house, but I will never leave Sahan. I am the final Sahan. But it is your duty to bring prosperity to other lands just like the water that left Sahan's land."

She took a breath.

"I am all that remains of the Sahan family. My darkness is now mine alone."

As her words rang through the air, Shahina closed her eyes.

After a while, the other women closed their eyes as well.

They slowly bowed their heads toward Arnavaz.

Soon, they all produced a slight wind. It was the wind of turning their backs on and walking away from Arnavaz and the mansion.

The final wind, the red wind of Shahina, paused to turn back.

“Lady Arnavaz, I pray that god blesses you and you meet that man.”

Mikage could not tell if Arnavaz nodded or not.

Her vision quickly grew dark and she fell into darkness.

However, she had a thought.

…She’s the same.

Mikage was a survivor of 3rd-Gear. Her parents were gone and she had survived by abandoning 3rd.

However, Mikage had never thought the things Arnavaz had.

…Because the people around me are so nice.

Another thought occurred to her.

Despite this past, Arnavaz was living a different life now.

She had reason enough to turn that sword on Abram, yet she was living with him and smiling as she tended to the flowers.

…Why?

Mikage then remembered what Sayama had said.

“Search for you own past.”

What did that mean? Did she have a past like that?

What if she did?

“…”

I want to know about it, she thought. *I might be able to change like Arnavaz.*

Arnavaz had grown kind even as she carried this past with her.

So if Mikage learned of her past, would she grow kind too?

And if so…

“Would I actually be able to say something if I saw Kazami crying again?”

She carved in her heart the desire to search for the past.

And as she repeated that desire to deepen the carving, she woke from the past.

●

"…"

Heo opened her eyes and found the evening vegetable garden.

She saw Arnavaz in front of her, the shadows of the vegetables, the forest, and the evening sky.

A faint wind blew as Arnavaz narrowed her eyes in a smile.

"I just felt like I had a dream of a familiar voice."

"Y-yes. That was from Baku and it was your past. I'm sorry, but we saw it too."

Arnavaz shook her head.

"That is an important thing that really did happen. It is not something to hide."

"You're not like Ryuuji-kun. He says the important parts are best when slightly hidden."

"M-Mikage, I think he was talking about something else."

Mikage tilted her head and Heo began to panic because she did not know how to explain it.

However, she was interrupted by footsteps running from the white building behind her.

"Eh?"

She turned toward the person running over.

"Ooki-sensei?"

"Yes!" said Ooki just before tripping and falling over what grew from Diana's flower bed.

The buried object came half from the ground and the leaves wrapped around her leg for some reason.

"Oww. What kind of plant is this? I've never seen anything like it."

"Ahhh, Ooki-sensei! You aren't supposed to pull it out!!"

Ooki only tilted her head, so Heo removed the plant from her hand and reburied it. She thought she saw something like a human face, but she ignored it and patted down the dirt with the provided spade.

"So what is it, Ooki-sensei?"

"Oh, r-r-r-right! It's an emergency, Heo-san! You need to listen."

"What is it?"

Heo was worried and the answer she received made her gulp.

"Are you listening?"

After trying to calm her down, Ooki gave the answer.

"Harakawa-kun's mother has collapsed!"

Chapter 17

“Reason for Agreement”

One two three
Even if you can count out the time
You still cannot hear your own bell

●

The sky above was bright and filled with a white light.

Below that sky was a structure of white sand.

It was a castle. The building was a square with sides exceeding several hundred meters and it stood twenty stories above ground.

Its sand was fixed in place and it sucked water in from underground, stored it like a sponge, and wet the surrounding gardens and land.

A kilometer long road extended from the front of the castle. The brick-paved road had manmade rivers running along either side. Something that emitted light swam through the gently-streaming rivers and wings of shadow flew through the white sky.

Shimmering heat rose from the road between the rivers.

A single gaze walked through that shimmering and toward the castle.

The gaze was situated high, but it barely moved up and down as it walked.

Clothes of wrapped white cloth were visible below the gaze.

The arms sticking out of those clothes were thick and the right hand held a spear. The spear was at least three meters long.

The walking gaze approached the castle without speaking a word. However, a sudden voice reached it from the right.

“Brother!”

The voice came from the shade of a tree on the side of the manmade river.

The gaze turned toward it.

A woman wrapped in orange cloth stood below the tree.

The gaze stopped and waited as she smiled and ran over.

“Shahrnavaz, should the future queen really be out here? Hm?”

“What about you, brother? Why doesn’t 9th-Gear’s general have anyone accompanying him?”

“That’s fine. That’s fine, Shahrnavaz. I have the power to move an army. If I don’t do my best to hide that fact in everyday life, the politicians will get scared. Isn’t that right?”

“But the people in the palace are complaining about that. They say the current general is unreliable.”

“Ha ha,” the owner of the gaze laughed and showed off his teeth

in a smile. “Unreliable? Yeah, that’s probably true. After all, I haven’t shown them how reliable I can be. Talks have begun with 3rd about a joint attack on Low-Gear now that they’re causing a little trouble, but the palace has not seen that yet. …Incidentally, travelling to all these different Gears feels like the pilgrimage I took as a child. Yes.”

“C’mon. Can’t you worry about him a little bit and show off for everyone? The rumor in the palace is that you didn’t give him any kind of bodyguard because you have no intention of protecting him.”

“Is there any need to protect him? Hm? Sarv is the king and he is even more powerful than me.”

“I’m not so sure.”

“Shahrnavaz, you are supposed to say ‘of course he is’. Or do you want to be burned at the stake? Hm?”

Shahrnavaz smiled bitterly at that.

She then slowly looked behind the owner of the gaze.

The owner of the gaze also looked back.

The road and rivers were cut off by a stairway.

The land below the stairway was filled with buildings.

It was a city. The houses and other buildings were made of sand and they formed complex rows. Countless dark trees with white leaves were growing among them. The long reflections of light within the city were rivers.

The expanse of the city filled their vision to the left and right and it continued all the way to the horizon.

White smoke was rising here and there within the city and the vehicles people rode reflected the light of the sky.

All of that continued far into the blurry corners of the city.

However, a single form was visible beyond it all.

It looked like a wall at the end of it all.

Something far wider and longer than the vast city sat atop the horizon. More than walling off a side of the city, it seemed to wall off a side of the entire world.

The owner of the gaze spoke the name of that being that resembled a dark shadow.

“It took millennia to build the world dragon Zahhak. Once it absorbs the concepts of the other Gears, it will become the great world-changing dragon that fills this world with all the other

concepts.”

“Yes, Sarv resumed development after it was abandoned over a thousand years ago. That is our world’s project. It is currently sitting at standby with half of this Gear’s concepts inside. However, it seems trouble with developing the brain is going to make autonomous function impossible. It can manage simple environmental circulation, though.”

“That is enough. If we no longer need to worry about water, 9th can develop even further.”

“Yes,” agreed Shahrnavaz. “He looked at what 9th-Gear did in the past and predicted that the remnants of the other Gears would continue to attack this world even after those other Gears were destroyed. For example, what happens if 5th’s mechanical dragons regain their memories? Right now, he is working to stop the palace from attacking 10th using an underground force in 10th. He says we should attack Low-Gear first.”

“He wants to rid them of their defiant spirit with a crushing defeat and to solve the mystery of Low-Gear, doesn’t he?”

“Yes. That mystery that has long been spoken of that lowest Gear.”

The owner of the gaze nodded at his sister’s words.

“If you gather records on that lowest Gear, you will occasionally find some odd reports. Sometimes when a location there is reused as a battlefield, the previous destruction of the location’s string vibrations will have vanished. That opens the possibility of Low-Gear healing string vibration damage.”

“I do not know what it means either, but Sarv says he wants to speak with you in private because he has a theory about it. He says we are facing great possibility and great destruction.”

“Great possibility and great destruction?” he repeated.

Shahrnavaz nodded and looked him in the eye.

“I do not know what he meant, but he also said Zahhak would help gather everything in the name of righteousness. And he said he needs your help.”

“Hm.”

The owner of the gaze clearly did not understand, so Shahrnavaz smiled. She took a step back, leaned forward, and looked up at her thinking brother.

“Well, once you and Sarv return from Low-Gear, Zahhak’s brain should be complete. Then the palace won’t be able to complain. … Sarv’s been having a tough time. He said going to Low-Gear and searching for that ‘possibility and destruction’ would let him avoid speaking with the palace.”

“I see. Then I need to bring him back safely. Yes. …For that and for your official marriage.”

“Oh, my,” said Shahrnavaz with a smile.

She turned back toward the gaze but then looked to the city.

“I would like peace for a wedding gift. You all will probably be destroying a lot of Gears from here on, but promise me you will take in those Gears and bring about peace and understanding in the end.”

“Didn’t I tell you that fighting is my job? Hm? And once the fighting is over…”

“You will retire and go somewhere to disappear, right? If he heard that, I’m sure he would stop you.”

“This way is fine. If I stayed, the people would expect me to take an important position and take part in politics. However, Sarv is my only king. …After all, he is the man who did not lose when he fought me in the duel between royal representative and military representative. That’s a world of difference from those politicians who weaseled out of it by calling it an outdated tradition.”

“He may not have lost, but he didn’t win either.”

“He did win.”

The owner of the gaze looked away from his sister and into the white sky.

“When you stopped the duel, you stood in my way. The sister of the greatest military family protected the man with the greatest royal position. I only have the greatest military position, so I can’t beat that. Isn’t that right? Hm?”

He took a breath.

“Once we return from our trip to Low-Gear, the people will recognize the strength in Sarv that only I have seen. And if that continues, the people will eventually realize he is exactly the sort of person who should make me his subordinate.”

Hearing that, she spread her arms forward.

“I hope you’re right. He said you were the only one he could not

defeat, but men like to talk big. …I hope you can imagine what it is like to be the one waiting for your return. So please return safely. If you don't, who knows what the palace will start saying."

"I will return safely and I will make sure he does as well."

The owner of the gaze spoke to her and to the city she almost seemed to be embracing.

"I promise you as the general of 9th-Gear. I promise you for the peace of all Gears. But…what is this secret truth of Low-Gear that Sarv wants to talk about?"

"I don't know, but I think it is important. So go hear him out. After all, I am his only ally in the palace. Go save him. Go save my hero."

"Your hero, hm? That's what you called him when you stood in my way, wasn't it?"

"I am glad you gave in during that duel. That is what brought the military and the throne together."

The brother narrowed his eyes at his sister's words and he stared into the vast city filled with people.

"So this world is ruled by a hero. But if he is a hero, then what am I? Hm?"

His sister laughed at his question.

"Good question," she began. "I will tell you when you return from Low-Gear. If you protect my hero and bring him back…"

Her words vanished into the sky.

"Then what *will* you be in my eyes?"

●

Below the dull sky of early evening was a gray factory.

It was located at the entrance to the Takao Mountains, the trees around it were beginning to grow red or yellow, and the pale sunlight of early evening poured down on and seemed to surround the trees and factory.

A clearing had been dug down behind the factory.

A color there reflected the sunlight.

That color was silver.

The reflective silver came from the sword swinging through the air near the center of the clearing.

The sword was wielded by a girl with long hair. She was sweating despite the late autumn chill and she repeatedly stepped forward

and sliced through the air at tremendous speed.

At first, her lips had moved to count each time she stepped forward and struck, but the numbers had vanished once she exceeded three digits and only the action remained.

The racing silver line in the center of the clearing was always the same.

The girl moved.

Those movements remained steady even as her surroundings changed.

As the sun began to set, the direction of the reflected sunlight shifted.

That light had rotated around the embankment surrounding the clearing.

A man slept on that illuminated grassy embankment.

It was an elderly Arab man in a white coat.

The reflected light caressing his face finally reached his eyes.

"…?"

He frowned and opened his one eye.

When he looked into the sky, he gasped, almost as if the sky before his eyes was an unfamiliar sight.

But after a short pause…

"…Hm."

He stood up, did not bother to brush the grass from his back, and slowly faced forward where the producer of the silver light continued moving without rest.

"Mikoku."

After his call, the light shook.

It continued moving despite the disturbance.

"What is it, father? I am trying to focus for tonight."

"Is Shino not with you?"

"Shino…went to the Tamiya house. She thinks I have not noticed."

Her tone was weak and she continued even though Hajji said nothing.

"Part of me thinks this is for the best. We will be separated eventually, so maybe it is best if that separation begins now."

"I see." Hajji nodded, crossed his arms, and thought for a moment. "Where are Tatsumi and Jord?"

"Are you changing the subject?"

He smiled bitterly. He brought a hand to his mouth and showed the smile only in his eyes.

“I am. Yes, I am, Mikoku. I was following your lead since this practice is meant to point your heart away from dark feelings.”

“I am simply rethinking my inexperience from last night. It was that inexperience that prevented my sword from so much as reaching ‘Betrayed Expectations’ Jord.”

“Not true.”

Hajji sensed her confused gaze, so he gave a firm nod.

“Her concept provides a special kind of defense. Yes. None of your attacks will affect her unless you see through that trick. Training is not enough. You must change the way you think.”

“Are you saying even I could defeat her if I changed the way I think?”

“Yes.”

“Then,” said Mikoku. “My mind is inexperienced. And I can still say this training is for tonight.”

“Are you sure it isn’t for Shino?”

She did not answer.

She only continued sending the silver light around, so Hajji shrugged.

Soon, she spoke again.

“As I already said, Shino went to the Tamiya family. And she thinks I have not noticed.”

Her tone seemed to be testing him to see what he would say in response.

And so he gave his response.

“I see.”

That was all.

Mikoku reacted by relaxing her shoulders a little even as she swung the blade. Her mouth opened a bit.

“But I suppose that is for the best.”

“What is?”

“Shino will be alone eventually, so it is best if she leaves us now and learns how to enjoy herself on her own.”

“I see,” said Hajji again with a hand over his mouth. “And you are willing to make her hate you to ensure that? Hm?”

Mikoku did not immediately reply. After a pause, she closed her

eyes.

"That is fine."

She opened her eyes immediately afterwards and began on a new topic entirely.

"Jord is asleep to prepare for tonight, but why is she fighting?"

"Oh, that's simple. Yes. I do enjoy talking, so I guess I'll tell you."

He removed his hand from his mouth and looked up into the sky.

"She was originally part of 10th-Gear's royal family and she has lived since the Concept War era. With that said, let me ask you something, Mikoku. Do you know why she would use concept weapons modelled after Low-Gear weapons?"

"You mean it isn't just because they suit her?"

"She is a 10th-Gear royal, so she would normally use 10th's weapons."

"Oh."

Hajji stood up and brushed off the grass on his butt.

"She chooses this world's weapons because she wants to harm this world with its own weapons. …She is 'Betrayed Expectations' Jord. She lost her husband during the Concept War and the result of the fighting betrayed her every expectation, but weapons do not betray your expectations. Yes."

He looked up to the thin clouds remaining in the evening sky.

He knew very well why Jord was fighting.

…This world is hopelessly insufficient compared to the Gears we lived in.

It lacked knowledge, technology, power, land, nature, and so much more.

And so very much had been corrupted.

"In 10th-Gear, spirits lived in the air, so air without spirits feels like a vacuum to a 10th resident. On top of that, the vacuum is filled with all of the exhaust built up over this world's history."

"Right," said Mikoku as she swung her sword. "I heard the mother and grandmother of Team Leviathan's Izumo were from 10th-Gear and that their lives were shortened by Low-Gear's polluted air."

"Yes. That is why they rarely leave the reservation. And all of them wonder why they had to come here after surviving 10th-Gear's destruction."

Hajji then said something else.

"Jord's friend married a man of this world during the Concept War."

"…!"

Hearing that gasp of surprise, he spoke.

"Do not stop your blade, Mikoku."

"B-but you are talking about the Izumo family's-…"

"It is a common story, Mikoku. Yes. One thing gods and men have in common is the inability to understand what goes on in others' hearts."

You understand what I mean, don't you? he silently added as Mikoku wordlessly began to move once more.

Her movements were steady and undisturbed.

"Yes, we cannot understand it. That is why Jord does not understand. And she certainly never expected the next person to marry a man from Low-Gear to be…her own daughter."

"…"

Mikoku gasped again, but her blade remained in motion. Satisfied with that, Hajji turned his back on her.

He placed a hand over his mouth.

"Her friend helped destroy 10th-Gear and married the destroyer. That friend went on to live in this world and die because of it. However, the friend's husband died as well, so it should have been over."

He took a step forward and up the grassy embankment.

"But when her own daughter decided to marry that friend's son, her expectations were betrayed yet again. Yes. Her daughter visited the reservation after having her child, but Jord apparently never again allowed her daughter to see her."

"And…?"

"And her daughter died just like her friend."

Hajji finished climbing the embankment while listening to the regular sounds of the sword slicing through the air behind him.

"It seemed her grandson chose to live in this world, so she expected nothing of that boy. He had decided to live in the world that had taken her world, taken her friend, and taken her daughter, so she saw no reason to expect anything of him."

"Then why is she fighting?"

“Well,” said Hajji as he turned to the right and toward the factory. “Probably because she wants to make sure her world and this world disappointingly betray her expectations.”

“…”

“She wants to send a message by crushing her grandson and the 10th-Gear Concept Core which could be viewed as the world that was stolen from her.”

He took a breath.

“She will be saying that everything they stole from her was below her and thus not what she expected.”

Mikoku replied with only a slight disturbance in her swinging sword.

“You mean she wants to laugh off what she had protected and believed in and view them as disappointments? She wants to say what was stolen from her in the past was not that big a deal?”

“Only Jord can decide how she feels, Mikoku. It is not our place to decide for her. Right?”

As he spoke, he began to walk.

The disturbance was gone from Mikoku’s blade, so he decided he could bring her to battle and she could fight without her feelings influencing her actions.

He could not lose Mikoku, Shino, or the others in the battle that night.

Mikoku had powerful regeneration, but it was not perfect. If the blue philosopher’s stone in her chest was destroyed, she would die.

…It is powerful, but it almost seems too simple for something made by her.

Hajji thought as he walked along the embankment. That philosopher’s stone was the final one made by Mikoku’s mother.

She had been an expert in philosopher’s stone creation and he did not know the details about that one. If it did have some hidden power, he had been unable to draw it out.

If there was something there, Mikoku herself would likely find it after tonight’s battle.

…What did I actually accomplish?

Jord probably wonders the same thing, he thought while hiding the bitter smile on his lips.

He then heard Mikoku’s voice from back and to the right as she

swung her sword.

"Father, thank you for keeping me company during this busy time."

"Oh, what's this, Mikoku? Are you trying to make it rain? Hm?"

"I am never thanking you again!"

He heard her click her tongue and he laughed as he continued walking. *This is best,* he thought. *This is how we usually act.*

But her voice reached him again.

"Father."

"What is it? Hm?"

"Well." She swung her sword. "Um… You seemed to be having a pleasant dream earlier. Who was it of?"

"Oh." He scratched his head. "That's a good question. I forget. It was a dream of an old, old era. After all…"

"After all?"

"That was a dream of a time when I too wanted to be a hero. … That makes it pretty old, doesn't it?"

Mikoku replied while steadily swinging her blade.

"Then what are you now? Filled with betrayed expectations?"

He replied while looking up into the sky.

"That's another good question."

He weakly muttered the words and watched the scarlet sky as he walked.

Finally, he spoke some quiet words into that scarlet-colored sky.

"I will think about that during tonight's battle, Mikoku."

Chapter 18

“Something Important to Me”

Try looking straight at it
You will no longer be able to see it

●

Water could be heard in the darkness.

The flowing water was falling. It fell from high up in the air and crashed into the rocky area down below.

It was a waterfall.

The moonlight was obstructed by the rocks, so it did not reach the waterfall. The moonlight did illuminate the stony basin and a sign in the nearby rest area gave the waterfall's name: Hossawa Falls.

This was deep in Hinohara, west of Akigawa and one mountain south of Okutama.

Geographically, it was part of the Akigawa Mountains directly south of Okutama and the waterfall in those mountains continued dumping water despite the darkness.

A single color moved within that darkness and the background noise of the falling water.

That color was white.

That color which opposed the darkness stood up within the rest area next to the waterfall.

It was a girl in a white coat that had the name Chao sewn on the inside.

"Honestly, why are you running so far away, Yonkichi? That's just pathetic."

"I have no excuse, ges."

The second voice came from below the falling water.

Someone was inside the waterfall's basin.

Only Yonkichi's upper body was exposed.

That upper body was missing its left arm and the darkness left only a wavering shadow visible as the water poured on top of him.

"I am washing away the pain, ges. The breath of nature in this clear stream will heal the dragon's wound, ges."

"You really are the same as 7th's people. You raise your natural healing by 'washing the wound' and 'not showing the wound'. It's like possessing your own disinfectant or healing charms. …They used hot springs and open-air baths for their exhaustion just like us, though."

"In that case, Low-Gear is not much different, ges. Our version is simply stronger, ges."

Yonkichi collapsed within the basin and Chao heard him kicking his feet in the water.

"I had dyed my hair to stand out from my brothers, but it looks like that will end soon too, ges."

"Don't push yourself, you idiot. If you had messed up just a little, you would've lost your entire body, right? Soak in the pure water and get healed. …Anyway, how were those kids?"

It was not the man in the waterfall basin who responded.

A male voice came from behind her.

"I will go tonight."

Is that Mitsuaki? she thought as she turned around.

She frowned at the old man in a white coat standing within arm's reach of her.

"You shouldn't stand behind a lady."

"Are you sure you have not let your guard down, Lady Chao?"

"Pretty sure, yeah."

She raised her right hand to show off the green scroll in her slender fingers.

Mitsuaki frantically checked his pockets and realized what he was looking for was not there.

As if showing off, she spun the stolen scroll in her hand.

When she raised right arm, the quickly rotating green tube wrapped around her arm like a living creature.

As she waved her arm, the scroll moved from her right shoulder, spun around her neck, and rotated all the way to the end of her left arm.

The sound of rustling cloth and the sound of her catching the scroll in her left hand filled the darkness.

"The environmental manipulation concept weapon 'Cosmos Comic – #1'. It was originally meant to stabilize the environments of the reservations, but it was so powerful that it was made into a weapon and then sealed. …Do you remember who made it?"

"Sayama Asagi."

"Yes. He made Ikkou's Azure Dragon Sword too, I believe. …Are you going back to Team Leviathan with that?"

"Yes. We have yet to settle things with them. However, we are giving some thought as to who we choose to fight. Kazami-sama and the others are almost entirely out of the fight."

After a pause, Mitsuaki continued.

"Even so, we will not hold back. We will make sure they all join the fight."

Chao threw the scroll back to him with a snap of her fingers.

He opened the left side of his white coat and the spinning scroll fell right into the inner pocket.

Chao then frowned at what he had said.

"I don't approve of bullying the weak. Kazami's probably been crying this entire time."

"Lady Chao, do you remember Kazami-sama's first battle?"

"Her first battle?"

"Yes." Mitsuaki smiled. "A single normal person ended up inside the concept space and the main forces of 6th and 10th were headed her way. It was Izumo-sama…and us who rushed out to save her."

"Oh, right. That did happen."

"She could have run away. As a normal person, 6th and 10th would not have viewed her as an enemy. …But Sibyl-sama was also on the truck transporting G-Sp and X-Wi. Amid the fierce fighting, Kazami-sama hid Sibyl-sama in a safe place and then rejoined Izumo-sama on the battlefield. There, she helped him restrain the prototype Vritra that 6th had activated in an attempt to self-destruct," explained Mitsuaki. "And yet when we originally rushed to the scene, we had thought there was no saving her."

"So why did she lose so easily this time when she's trained so much since then?"

"That is the real question. All I can say is that there is a difference between who she used to be and who she is now."

He turned his back and faced the darkness.

"This is far from entertaining. The girl we once underestimated and who made us rethink our opinion of her is now perfectly in line with our original underestimation of her. …How very boring."

He began to walk and a voice reached him from the waterfall basin.

"Brother Mitsuaki."

"What is it, Yonkichi?"

"Will I ever see you again, ges?"

"You know that as well as I do. …And one other thing."

On the fifth step, just as he was about to vanish into the dark

forest, he stopped.

Wondering what this was about, Chao watched him as he spoke without turning around.

"As #37 on his list of things to do before disappearing, Brother Ikkou pissed from the top of this waterfall while humming."

"I-I can't believe him, ges!!"

Chao could only laugh bitterly as she heard the man kicking in the water.

Mitsuaki vanished into the darkness and she looked up into the sky.

However…

"All I can see is the ceiling."

She was in the rest area, so she only saw the inside of the cement roof.

After a self-deprecating laugh, she limply sat in the seat made from a cut log.

"Lady Chao?"

"Don't worry about it, Yonkichi. I played with Mitsuaki's scroll, remember? That was enough to wear me out a little."

She raised her right hand and used her body to hide it from the waterfall basin behind her.

Her fingers were trembling ever so slightly.

…Pathetic. My lifespan is just about at its limit, too.

"Hey, Yonkichi," she called out. "We're all acting without restraint now, aren't we? …Or were we too restrained until now?"

"What are you trying to say, ges?"

Her self-deprecating smile changed to a bitter one.

…There's no way I can tell you what I'm trying to say if you ask like that.

The bitter smile grew.

"Something you wouldn't understand, Yonkichi. If only I had given your brain some of your Great Sage's power."

"…"

She thought about the past. She thought about when she had created them in 7th-Gear so very long ago.

It had been fun, but she had never thought about it ending like this.

She had thought she had known and understood it would, but…

…Can I say I was young and stupid as an excuse?

"Yonkichi, you might be the most like me."

"…"

"Your injury has mostly closed up, hasn't it? So go to the place you will find most entertaining."

"No, it hasn't closed up yet."

"What happened to the 'ges'?"

"I-it hasn't closed up yet, ges. I need to rest a little while longer, ges."

"I see," she said with a nod.

She gently rotated her body atop the log seat.

Her moving gaze looked outside the rest area.

All she saw was the dark night, but…

…Everyone is watching this darkness right now. Even if they don't realize it, they are enveloped by it.

"What are your doing and what will you do?"

…Ikkou, Nijun, Mitsuaki, and Yonkichi.

Those thoughts in her heart did not form words, but she spoke something else aloud.

"Shinjou, Kazami, Hiba, Sayama, and the others."

●

The sky had turned black, but the starlight was bright enough to cast shadows on the ground and create areas that were darker than others.

One of those darker areas was an eastern slope near Mount Kumotori, Tokyo's tallest peak.

A large area of land had been created by digging down into the slope and the remains of the slope cast a large shadow on that land.

However, a single light existed inside that large shadow.

A small fluorescent light came from within the abandoned house at the bottom of the shadows.

It was an old Japanese-style house with an earthen-walled storehouse to the northeast.

The roof had a hole and the sun had faded the house's wood until it was gray.

The sliding door for the southeastern entrance had fallen to the ground to rot, but the faded nameplate said "Kinugasa".

Through the entrance were a dirt floor and a hand-pump for drinking water to the left.

The house had three rooms: the living room with a sunken fireplace, the parlor with a broken floor, and the bedroom. The rooms were divided by sliding screens that had yellowed with age and sliding doors that had lost their paper.

All of the rooms were faded, but color was beginning to fill the living room.

A white fluorescent light on the floor illuminated the flesh color and other colors printed on a piece of paper.

It was a poster.

A voice spoke in front of the poster.

“Heh heh heh. There is no need to restrain yourself any longer, Shinjou-kun.”

A boy spoke and hummed to himself as he hung up the large B2 poster on one of the living room’s sliding screens.

His suit coat lay over his shoulder and the name Sayama was stitched inside the collar.

He was in the process of hanging the fourth poster.

The poster he spread in his arms depicted a girl in a beige dress. She stood below the summer sun and she must have been spinning in the wind because her long black hair gently danced behind her.

Seeing the smile on the girl’s face, Sayama gave a deep nod.

“That is Shinjou-kun for you. You could almost forget what a dreary room this is.”

He held the poster up horizontally and attempted to peek up Shinjou’s skirt.

“No, I suppose that would not work. But leave it to Shinjou-kun to make me try. …Is this what you call an enchantress?”

He thumbtacked this poster next to the school uniform, pajamas, and swimsuit ones he had already hung along the wall.

…Magnificent.

However, he spotted something. His eyes stopped on the corner of the poster he had just hung up.

“Oh, no. The corner is bent by five millimeters! And after I went to so much trouble to make sure not to bend them. …Such a shame. I must give myself a fierce objection. I must ask for an apology. I am sorry! …Good. But what would Shinjou-kun think if I told her I had bent the corner of a poster made from a secret photograph of her?”

He sighed, brought a hand to his forehead, and envisioned her scolding him.

After exactly a minute, his vision came to an end.

“Being scolded is delightful as well. …Should I have her strike me too!?”

Hearing his voice ring throughout the house, he came back to his senses.

“Hm.”

He crossed his arms in front of the four posters and tilted his head as he questioned himself.

“I am not sure what to say. I seem a little out of control today. Have I always been like this or is it a symptom of my Shinjou-kun withdrawal? No… I drank that miraculous powdered Eround Tea earlier, so it could not be the latter. In that case…”

…Is it those drugs from last night?

Ryouko had given them to him, but why had he taken them himself?

“It had to have been to protect Shinjou-kun from myself as I tried to give them to her.”

…I see. So this excitement comes from those drugs.

You cannot fight a drug, so I have no choice but to continue like this, he concluded.

He then recalled his job.

"Oh, no. I completely forgot. …I need to put up the life-size poster."

He unrolled the poster to reveal a nude Shinjou with back turned and a large public bath in the background.

He looked at her face as she tried to decide which washing station to use.

"The instructions say your mother will not notice it if you hang it on the back of your door, but that is meaningless since this is for my own personal use."

For the time being, he hung it on the sliding screen leading to the next room.

"Good," he muttered before opening the sliding screen.

The next room had originally had a tatami mat floor, but that floor was gone.

It had fallen away, leaving a large hole.

"This room is no different from before."

This was an abandoned house.

Sayama looked down at the collapsed and darkened tatami mats below the floor and he looked up.

He saw the dark sky through the hole in the ceiling.

He had checked under the floor when he had entered the house. He had hoped to find some trace of his parents, but he had found nothing.

He had concluded that the house was a completely normal building.

But that is strange, he thought. If this was Kinugasa's house…

…Where did he do his research?

The documents Roger Sully had given him said what his father had called the Kinugasa Document had been found in Kinugasa's residence.

As Sayama looked around the place, he suddenly turned to the yard.

Beyond the missing sliding door, he saw the white storehouse to the northeast.

"That thing is sturdily built."

So if there was a study or lab here…

…It would be in the storehouse.

He had yet to set foot inside there. He had been planning to do so after preparing for the night.

“I have to hurry.”

He nodded and returned to the room. He sat while looking at the line of Shinjous hanging on the sliding screens.

“That leaves one last thing to prepare.”

He unrolled a blue sleeping bag on the floor and placed something next to it.

“A Shinjou-kun body pillow cover. Not even the Buddha himself would have thought to place this on his sleeping bag.”

He quickly placed the pillow cover on the sleeping bag and spread it out.

This created an image of Shinjou in her pajamas that had actual volume to it.

“Splendid.”

He gave a few impressed laughs, but soon began to tremble.

He let out a gasp and brought a hand to his forehead.

“But now I cannot hug her while inside the sleeping bag! This is what you call a structural flaw! The best word to express this situation is ‘careless’!”

…Oh, god.

He unrolled another poster sitting behind him and revealed an image of Shinjou looking angry.

He thought to himself as he viewed that expression.

…Shinjou-kun truly would be this angry if she knew of my carelessness.

I must be more reliable. Is there no way of solving this problem?

He thought and slapped his knee when finally found an answer.

“I only need to turn it inside out and put it inside.”

He politely thanked the angry poster and set it aside.

He removed the cover from the sleeping bag and turned it inside out, so Shinjou was on the inside of the bag-like cover.

Nodding, he placed the cover inside the sleeping bag.

He glanced toward the storehouse outside.

“Perhaps I should test it out before entering the storehouse.”

With a dignified nod, he removed his shoes and excitedly stuck his feet inside the sleeping bag.

He stuck his hands inside, drew his head inside, grabbed the

zipper in his teeth, and pulled it closed.

The top opening of the cover had sunk down, so he pulled it up and closed it to form a cloth log.

He was now fully inside from head to toe.

He breathed a sigh of relief, but then…

“Oh, no. It is too dark to see Shinjou-kun! This is what you call a situational flaw! The best English word to express this situation is ‘goddamn’!”

He tried to get out, but he was so perfectly wrapped up that the cloth worm only squirmed and bent.

Also, the movement twisted the cover tightly around him.

“Nwah! Y-you’re squeezing me, Shinjou-kun!? And so roughly. Ahh! But this is also quite entertaining!”

In an abandoned house in the starry mountain night, a blue sleeping bag writhed in the brightness of a small fluorescent light. Grunts came from the sleeping bag and it fiercely arched upwards, but it simply would not come off.

“Calm down. Calm down, me! If you do not escape this enjoyable hell, you will become a pervert. And it will interfere with the investigation!”

The stuffed sleeping bag hopped up with its back muscles and forcefully stood. It then stretched its back, struck a pose with its chest proudly thrown forward, and briefly shrank down in preparation for a leap.

A moment later, the dark blue sleeping bag jumped straight up.

“Toh!”

And…

“The force of landing should make it easier to remo-…”

His feet landed on the angry Shinjou poster and slipped.

He fell.

The action created a perfect half arc backwards.

The log-like sleeping bag forcefully rotated and the back of the head crashed between two floorboards.

A dull sound came from the sleeping bag that had been physically unable to prepare for the landing.

But the voice that escaped it was not a grunt or a groan.

“Heh.”

As soon as that breath leaked from the sleeping bag, the

floorboards beneath the head broke and the broken portion sank down like a seesaw.

The sleeping bag writhed as it slid down the tilted floorboards.

“Ahhh, Shinjou-kun! I am falling! I really am falling? Continue just like this!”

The shouting sleeping bag vanished into the darkness below the floor.

Nothing remained and silence fell.

As if that silence was its cue, hooting began in the nearby forest.

It came from an owl.

The hooting continued as something crawled out from below the edge of the abandoned house.

It was Sayama.

“I still have work to do, but I ended up playing quite intensely.”

He stood and brushed the dust from his hands, knees, and shoulders.

He reached to the living room floor, grabbed his shoes, his rucksack, and a few other items.

“Now that I have had a break, it is time to get down to business.”

He put the rucksack on his back, held the handheld fluorescent light in one hand, and expressionlessly turned around.

He now faced the storehouse.

It almost seemed to be waiting for him as it was illuminated by the pale moonlight.

●

Sayama left the house and observed the white moonlit storehouse.

It was about four meters tall and he estimated it was a little less than ten square meters inside.

Its white walls had crumbled in places to reveal the straw and earth inside.

“If Professor Kinugasa had a study, it must be in here.”

He began to walk and observed the large yard as he approached.

Gravel was laid out in front of the house to keep the undergrowth away, but there was nothing else save the camellia trees placed on the other side as a windbreak. Sayama guessed there had originally been a garden, but he did not bother confirming that now.

He approached the storehouse.

He also double-checked that the surrounding mountains were the same as in the photograph Moira 1st had given him.

"The storehouse's entrance is…"

He found it.

The gravel path starting at the house's back entrance led to a rectangular entrance on the south.

The entrance sat open and the metal door opened inwards.

Sayama saw a dimly-lit space inside.

…If the door is open, does that mean the inside has been exposed to the elements?

The situation was definitely worse than when his parents had come.

He knew there was no point in rushing now, but he still quickened his pace toward the entrance.

A single footstep sounded as he unhesitatingly set foot inside.

"?"

There was nothing there.

"…?"

Nothing at all. He only saw…

…The dirt floor and white walls of a storehouse?

He swallowed words of disbelief and looked around the inside.

However, he truly did not find anything except for damp air.

He illuminated each surface with the fluorescent light in his hand, but he found nothing but filth on the ceiling, walls, and dirt floor.

"…"

Whoever had made it must not have wanted water getting in because the floor was built high and thick grooves had been dug along each wall and leading to the entrance.

The farther from the entrance, the more dust was piled up on the floor.

But that was all.

Sayama frowned at the fact that there was nothing here.

However, his expression suddenly changed.

"I do not believe it."

He frowned, narrowed his eyes, and looked around the room.

"…"

That was when he noticed something.

He had found something one would not notice at a glance and would seem like an optical illusion if one stared.

A large square shadow existed in the center of the storehouse, but it was much paler than a normal shadow.

“It is two square meters, but what is it?”

He reached the answer almost immediately.

…Is something being concealed with a concept?

This was not optical camouflage using colors. This was conceptual camouflage.

What was here?

He looked around again and noticed some words.

There was a message inside the storehouse.

It was engraved on the inward-closing metal door.

Words had been carved into the metal surface.

“To he who comes here.”

Sayama carefully read the engraved words aloud.

“Know that the entrance to the truth is not here…!”

Sayama gulped and expressed his surprised thoughts.

“He even engraved the final ‘…!’! Kinugasa Tenkyou knew what he was doing…!”

Chapter 19

“Annihilating Betrayal”

I want to hear what you have to say

●

With his rucksack on his back, Sayama looked around from the entrance of the storehouse.

He could see a collection of shadow in the center of the floor about three meters ahead.

The shadow appeared to be two meters square, but its shape was not clear.

Sayama guessed it was something hidden by concept camouflage.

He then turned away from the pale bluish shadow and looked to the open metal door behind him.

“ ‘Know that the entrance to the truth is not here…!’, hm?”

He crossed his arms in thought and wondered if that text was the key to revealing the shadow.

…But is it truly not here?

If that visible shadow could be described as “not here”, then the text was exactly right.

But since it was visible, there had to be something there.

“Then I need to investigate.”

He raised his head and began looking around inside the storehouse.

He checked everywhere he could reach: the walls, the floor, the grooves in the floor, etc.

He touched it with the gloves he wore and even tapped around with a hammer he pulled from his bag.

However…

“There is nothing odd here.”

He walked outside.

The moonlight had grown stronger and the air he breathed felt colder.

The owl had stopped hooting.

All he heard was the susuki grass rustling in the breeze.

The word “tranquility” entered his mind as he walked along the storehouse’s outer wall.

The western wall that faced the mountain slope had crumbled, but there was nothing there.

He checked the other three sides as well, but…

“Nothing out of the ordinary.”

He took a few steps away from the storehouse.

He brought a hand to his chin and wondered if there was anything odd about the small building at all.

…There is not.

The opened door caught his interest, so he returned.

He entered the storehouse's darkness through the entrance and placed a hand on the metal door that was pressed against the left wall.

He tried pulling.

"Oh?"

It moved smoothly. It squeaked a little, but he could move it with no more resistance than the weight of the metal itself.

He slowly pulled it as if bringing it to himself.

Closing the door more or less drove him outside.

The hinge was located at the center of the door's edge and the building's connector stuck out at an angle. If he continued pulling, he could open the door outside the building as well.

That was likely a way of securing space near the entrance when carrying items into the storehouse.

Sayama stopped the door when it was horizontal to the entrance.

The storehouse looked better with the door temporarily closed like that.

It had no lock. Instead it had a hole for attaching a padlock.

After stopping the door, he took a few steps back.

…It would have been like this originally.

However, that was all. The storehouse had shown nothing out of the ordinary and this change had simply brought it to its natural state.

"…?

What does this mean? he wondered.

…It is not "here"? Then is it "there"?

In that case, where was "here"?

"Is it where one would see that text with the door in its normal closed state?"

Was "here" the inside of the storehouse?

In that case, "there" would be…

"Not inside the storehouse?"

With that question, he turned around.

However, he only saw the abandoned house and the gravel yard.

The yard contained nothing but gravel and plants that had withered during autumn.

It looked like something could be hidden within the susuki grass, but he had already decided crops had been grown there.

As for the house, he had already seen everything in there. There had not even been anything below the floor.

“In that case…”

Where is it? he wondered as he gently pushed open the metal door and stepped back inside the storehouse.

He meaninglessly paced to help himself think, but he suddenly looked up and opened his mouth.

“…”

He stopped walking and smiled bitterly.

He was acting exactly like someone asking for a hint.

However…

…There is no one here but me.

After reminding himself of that, he spoke.

“This would be somewhat different with Shinjou-kun, Kazami, Izumo, or any of the others here. We could split up, search around, and bounce ideas off each other if we did not find anything. …Izumo especially can say the most nonsensical things, but I can guide him to the correct answer as he tries to explain what he meant. And no matter what Shinjou-kun says, it inspires ideas and many other things within me.”

But he closed his eyes.

“But that is a kindness I cannot rely on now.”

He was alone. He did not even have Baku on his head.

He nodded, opened his eyes, and quickly sat on the dirt floor.

“In other words, I must remind my weak self that I am alone.”

Sitting, he released a relaxed breath.

Suddenly, he realized he was not alone after all.

This realization came from the left side of his chest.

He felt a pain as if someone had jammed their fingers inside his chest.

As he held his breath and trembled with sweat covering his body, he knew he would not be alone.

His gaze turned to the ground.

There were slight differences in height within the dust accumulated where not even the wind could reach.

These were old footprints that he had not made.

“These are…”

He knew who had been here before and the pain in his chest told him the answer.

This was a past he would never be free of as long as he lived.

“Traces of my parents.”

●

“I see,” muttered Sayama.

…My parents faced the same riddle as me.

The footprints travelled around the storehouse and then back outside.

He followed them out.

He closed the door and reentered the night.

He was a little short of breath as he stepped out below the starry sky.

“What do I do now?”

He crossed his arms, inhaled the surrounding night air, and felt the pain in his chest weaken.

He had a single problem to consider: the text written on the storehouse’s door.

…The entrance to the truth is not “here”.

Then where is it? he asked just as he noticed a change.

“The door is opening?”

He turned toward the movement of air behind him and found that the metal door was indeed opening inwards.

“?”

He placed a hand inside the storehouse, pulled the door back, and stopped it in the center position.

It wavered but finally stopped.

He took a few steps away and the door engraved with the words “Know that the entrance to the truth is not here…!” stayed in place.

“…”

But then it began to move. It slowly moved back inside the storehouse as if the wind were pushing it.

Why? he wondered.

“Or must I shout ‘Why…!?’ with a door like this? At any rate, what is going on?”

He tilted his head, observed the door, and noticed the trick.

The door was slightly tilted.

It was not really a trick at all. The door was simply made to open inwards.

The tilt was weak and it would not make it any more difficult to open the door in the opposite direction.

…Is it supposed to be a simple automatic door?

Sayama sighed, raised his handheld fluorescent light, and illuminated the inside of the storehouse.

He pointed the light into the darkness and observed the shadow in the center of the floor as he stepped inside.

“The entrance is not here. ‘Here’. As opposed to ‘there’.”

He muttered to himself as he thought and he found some of the dust had gotten wet and become part of the dirt.

My parents must have done the same thing, he thought while crouching down to observe the ground.

Should I perform a more thorough examination? he wondered.

“…”

All of a sudden, the top of this rucksack opened just a bit.

He was leaning forward, so the bag’s contents spilled over his head and forward.

This included a compass, some portable food, a whistle, and…

“Oh, no! The second Shinjou-kun life-size poster!”

That alone he managed to catch before it reached the ground.

He took a breath and lowered the bag to the ground.

He gathered the fallen objects and prepared to place the rolled life-size poster in last.

“…”

But he looked up instead.

…It can’t be. No…

“It is!”

He cried out and frantically put the rucksack on his back.

“What a… What a simple problem. It was so simple that I was about to lose tears, blood, and other bodily fluids over it.”

He stood, placed the bag’s straps over his shoulders, and hurried to the answer he had reached.

It was not “here”, so he moved “there”.

There being…

“The storehouse’s door!”

He faced the metal door that was opened all the way to the storehouse’s inner wall.

He shined the white fluorescent light on it, but that only revealed the same text as before.

However…

“The opposite of ‘here’ is ‘there’, but the scale of those words depends on the context. They could refer to the near and the far, but ‘there’ could also refer to a conceptually unreachable place or somewhere separated from ‘here’.”

Yes.

“Life-size posters can be hung on the inside of a door because the parents who stand out ‘there’ may open the door to ‘here’ in the child’s room, but they will not close the door behind them. The living people ‘here’ in this world may catch a glimpse of ‘there’ in the afterlife, but they cannot live there themselves.”

As he spoke, Sayama reached for the door and began to close it. And he did so from inside the storehouse.

However, there was nothing on the inside of the door. It was just a door.

…But that is the way it should be.

“The answer was already written on the other side.”

He closed the door.

However, the door moved forward. It moved outside and beyond the storehouse.

“It is not opening ‘here’. It is opening beyond the divide between ‘here’ and ‘there’.”

He looked past the opening door, but did not find the night.

He found…

“The inside of a storehouse?”

He saw some other space that should not have been there.

After opening the door from inside the storehouse, he saw the inside of a storehouse.

Another one existed there.

It was a square space of less than ten square meters and the dirt floor was elevated to keep water out.

And in the center…

…*A staircase.*

He saw the entrance to a staircase leading underground.

The staircase's ceiling descended along with it, so it formed a sort of tunnel.

The entrance was two meters square, making it the same size as the shadow on the "here" storehouse's floor.

…*Did my parents reach here?*

Pain filled his chest and his breathing grew erratic.

However, strength filled his thoughts and he set foot into the "there" storehouse.

He glanced behind himself and frowned at what he saw.

"The night."

He had been in the storehouse, but he was now outside.

He was surrounded by the moonlit yard and the abandoned house.

The world around him was unchanged. Only the inside of the door had changed.

He nodded and turned his back on that unchanged world.

"Here I go."

He mouthed someone's name and stepped forward.

He made his way toward the past and the dark depths of the earth.

●

A dark road sloped upwards.

The left side was lined with homes and the right side was a cement-covered slope.

The road was new and it had a sidewalk, but it did not have many streetlights. The slope surrounded by houses and cement was lit by both the streetlights and the light escaping the houses.

Stars filled the sky, so the people had already returned home and the houses were filled with light.

Someone walked through those manned lights and those unmanned lights.

It was Shinjou on the sidewalk. The bag on her back bounced up and down as she climbed the slope.

…*I need to hurry.*

The old woman at the church had given her the orphanage's address and that address was at the dead-end at the top of this hill.

The cement-covered slope filled the right side, so the orphanage would be on the left.

It was currently 6:30 PM and the bullet train back to Tokyo left at 9:18. She wanted to leave Sakai by 8:30.

"Can I finish this in only two hours?"

No.

"I will finish it!"

This was not for the people who had helped her. She simply wanted to find the answer and tell those people she had done it.

So she hurried.

A variety of information reached her from the houses she passed: the sounds from a TV, a crying child, a knife chopping something on a chopping board, something frying in oil, the smell of cooking fish, and the strong smell of curry and meat.

These were all household things she had not experienced, but…

"What will I find?"

If she did find information on Shinjou Yukio…

"Will I find that I might have experienced things like that at one point?"

Her question filled the air.

Hearing that question to herself, she extended her body and took in a breath.

"…!"

She began to dash.

She ran.

The top of the cement slope on the right came into view. It seemed the top of the hill was flat. There was a park surrounded by trees there, perhaps for the residential area on the left.

However, the park was dark. There were no lights inside.

…Why is it so dark?

She remembered what Kazami had said on the way to the Seto Inland Sea that summer. The Great Kansai Earthquake had caused a large-scale fault which had cut off the power supply to some regions.

And the orphanage she was heading to did not have a phone line.

She tried not to grow suspicious and continued running.

Her footsteps echoed off of the happy houses and the concrete slope.

That echo vanished from the slope first because it ended at the top of the hill.

She looked to the park on the right as she ran by and she saw a cul-de-sac of trees and a gate ahead on the road.

There were three houses left before reaching the old gate.

Noticing the gate was open, she took in a hopeful breath and picked up her speed.

She had only two houses to run past now.

She took another breath while swinging her arms and moving forward. She practically threw her body forward.

There was only one house left to pass now and it was completely dark.

She passed the old, empty house and reached the gate.

She stopped, exhaled, bent forward, and exhaled again with her hands on her knees.

"…"

A moment later, she took in a deep breath and looked up.

The open metal gate had a white plastic nameplate on it.

It said Soukou House.

That was the name she had been given, but she did not find a building beyond the gate.

"Eh?"

She only saw the broken edge of a cliff and the city's lights.

She saw the evidence of people's lives filling the expanse of darkness below the cliff.

The specks of light from houses and streetlights dotted the vast darkness beyond the gate. They showed where the roads were and where the residential areas were.

The orphanage that should have been there was not.

In its place, she found the gap of a cliff and the lights of the city at the bottom of the hill she had run up.

She looked beyond those lights and saw a massive black expanse.

It was the Seto Inland Sea.

She saw more light in the distance beyond that darkness, but that was likely the light of Shikoku.

The light people sent into the night began directly below and

continued into the great distance.

However, Shinjou belatedly spoke the name of what should have been here instead.

“Where’s the orphanage?”

Her voice was weak and her gaze dropped to her feet.

The ground ended after dropping about a meter past the open gate.

Below that, she saw darkness.

There was nothing there.

No, there was something at the bottom of the night’s darkness.

“The remains of the collapse that took the orphanage.”

The remains of a collapse covered an area three hundred meters long and about as wide.

It spread out in a fan shape starting from where she stood and it continued down to the city below.

“Tertiary…damages?”

Her lips spoke what she was afraid to even think in her heart.

“After giving up being a church and focusing on being an orphanage, there must have been a collapse from tertiary damages.”

The orphanage that should have sat beyond the gate was gone.

“Are the building and all the documents at the bottom of the collapse?”

As soon as she spoke those words, she found her vision dropping.

Her knees gave out and she fell to her butt.

“…”

She did not even have the willpower to complain.

She sat on her skirt on the cold asphalt. She lowered her hands as if clawing at the asphalt, but she did not even feel the pain in her nails.

“No…”

With her upper body supported by the bag on her back, she spoke toward the great empty space before her.

“It can’t be…”

There was nothing there.

She had had assumed she would eventually find the answer if she continued searching. After all, Shinjou Yukio had been in Sakai.

She had pursued the woman, she had overcome a number of

difficulties, and she had finally reached this place. However…

"It's not here?" she muttered while facing the remaining entrance and the night sky beyond it.

She shook her head and forced an expression she thought was a smile.

"It can't be."

Her voice was cheerful.

"This is just a joke, right?"

She laughed and beat the asphalt with her right hand as if she found this funny.

However, the action only tore at the asphalt with her nails.

It changed nothing.

After the span of five breaths, she lowered her head and spoke from beyond her lowered bangs.

"It can't be…"

She breathed in.

"It can't be!"

Her shoulders suddenly began to tremble in anger and she placed her fingers on the asphalt.

"This isn't right! I chased after her and hunted her down and I thought I would find the answer here…but now you're telling me there is no answer!?"

She breathed in.

"That can't be…"

She let out an extended shout and began to cry.

She wailed into the night sky. She leaned back, opened her mouth toward the heavens, and raised a voice of protest.

But she was beyond that empty house, so there was no one to hear her cry.

So she cried and cried with no one to interrupt her.

"No…"

She slammed her palm against the asphalt and clawed at it as if to fight this outcome.

"No… Why isn't it here?"

She thought of someone important to her and wondered why he was not here.

…Liar.

"You said you would be by my side when I cried!"

As soon as she shouted, something enveloped her from behind.

It was light.

The light was nearly scarlet and it brightly illuminated her.

She almost felt struck by the light and she drew back in surprise.

However, she used her surprise to bring strength to her body, wipe away her tears, and look back.

The light came from the park's entrance.

The gate at the entrance was open and the arch above it held a sign.

"Soukou House?"

That was the name on the sign.

"…!?"

She looked past the gate.

It did not lead to the dark remains of a collapse and the city beyond.

She saw the park ground illuminated by the scarlet light and…

"A new white building."

The building had a square roof measuring thirty meters across and a single triangular black bell tower.

Also, a middle-aged woman in white stood at the building's entrance.

"Oh? What's the matter? Why are you sitting out there?"

"Ah…" said Shinjou while trying to stand.

As she did, she heard a song.

The slightly muffled sounds of an organ reached her through the building's walls.

She then heard children singing.

"Silent Night."

"Yes, we are practicing for Christmas. If something is troubling you…"

Shinjou heard the woman's smiling voice mixed with the song.

"Why not tell me all about it?"

Afterword

Okay, here is Owari no Chronicle 5-A.

Wow, things have gotten serious! Well, maybe not that serious, but the story has passed the midpoint and it's thanks to all of you that I've made it this far. Thank you very much.

However, I can't really talk about the story since it would all involve things from Part B. Sorry. But I plan to continue writing this while thinking about and investigating the parts that are based on the real world.

Sakai appeared in the story, but the real Sakai is a nice city too. It's the kind of city that is a lot more fun if you know a little bit about Japanese history. Really, Kansai is packed full of places like that.

Anyway, let's get the usual chat started.

"You didn't read it, did you?"

"Read what? I thought this section was about talking about painful stories about our school days."

"That's a lot of 'abouts'. So can I get mad? Mad enough that you'll never want to talk to me again?"

"Sure, but if you don't say anything so bad that I never want to talk to you again, I'll stick with you forever and always be staring up at you with from somewhere even when we're apart! …If you're fine with that, then say it. If not, then bow down and apologize."

"Sorry, sorry. I'm bowing down, I promise. You can forgive me, right?"

"Next time, we're using a live camera during our chat. I'll be typing on the keyboard naked by the way."

"Really!? Then I'll leave the final color page free for you! Just wait for Part B!"

"Sorry, I'm bowing down now, so forgive me. And I completely forgot there was a Part B."

"Then if you have something to say, say it."

"Well… The other day, I hit my company president with a forklift."

"Violence from the get-go!? …And why? Because it was past nine on a Tuesday?"

"No, I was carrying too much stuff on it and he ran right out in

front of me. I realized what happened when the stuff I was carrying seemed to remain in a perfect shape of him for just an instant. The rest went flying everywhere."

"That's a valuable physical phenomenon."

"The pile of stuff on the floor also bulged up in his shape. Is that what you call the law of conservation?"

No, you idiot. Anyway, this novel's background music was Kienai Yoru by Anzen Chitai. I think it does a good job expressing the mood of a winter night.

"Who is sleeping?"

I'm also thinking about that, but Part B should be along soon to give the answer.

April 2005. A morning of subsiding allergies.

-Kawakami Minoru